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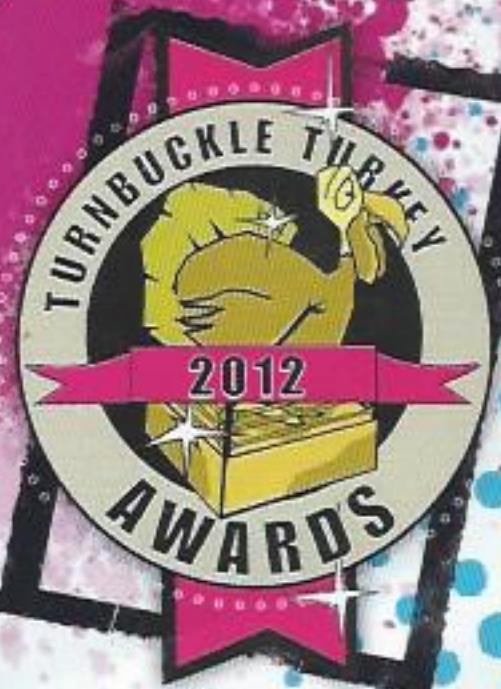
FLIP IT OVER!

INSIDE Wrestling®

"STONE-COLD"
EXCLUSIVE!

CONTENTS
UNDER
PRESSURE

Is Hardy's Shell Hard Enough
To Endure What's To Come?



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on the road

With Dave Lenker

CLOSE YOUR EYES and think about the picture that forms in your mind when I throw the word "demon" at you. Pretty disturbing mental image, isn't it? Then consider this comment the boyfriend (whether it's ex- or current boyfriend might depend upon the day you ask) of Tammy "Sunny" Sytch made about her this fall:

"When Tamara is sober, she is an amazing person," wrestler Damien Darling (Selvaggio) said in a statement to a Connecticut TV station, "but when she drinks, she is an uncontrollable, violent demon."

That's deeply troubling to me. It's not an image we associate with one of the most beautiful, charismatic, and talented WWE Divas of all-time.

Sytch was given a Turnbuckle Turkey in this issue for doing the kinds of things that prompted Darling to issue that chilling statement; you can read the details on page 26. It got so ridiculously absurd in September/October that if you saw a news item on Sytch on some website, you couldn't tell unless you read carefully whether it was yesterday's news or yet another arrest for virtually the same thing. Five arrests in September and October as of this writing, including on three consecutive days.

How serious is this?

Consider comments made by Lisa Marie Varon (TNA's Tara) in an interview posted on f4wonline.com. Keep in mind that Varon and Sytch are old friends, and that Varon has offered to allow her to stay with her in Chicago if she needs to get far away from Connecticut to try to get her life back on track:

"I'm not qualified to tell you what put her on this path, or if it's

harder in this industry," Varon said. "I do know that many of my friends from this industry have died. And that's the path she's on. It's misery and then death."

Blunt enough?

I won't profess to be an expert on addiction or substance abuse. I've known people who have done drugs. We all have. I have friends and members of my extended family who I think have or had drinking problems and should have at the very least considered getting professional help. I know that when you battle addiction, you never *win* the fight, because the fight never ends. It's not a baseball game, in which you can

gaze up at the scoreboard at the end of the ninth inning and know that if your team has a higher number than the other squad in the run column, you prevailed. When addiction is the opponent, for as long as you live there is always another inning to be played, and no matter how big your lead appears to be, that opponent always gets another chance to overtake you. That opponent is resilient, ruthless, and unpredictable.

I met Tammy Sytch 20 years ago this coming spring. I was a few months into my career with these magazines, and she and boyfriend Chris Candido came to the office for a photo shoot. I had

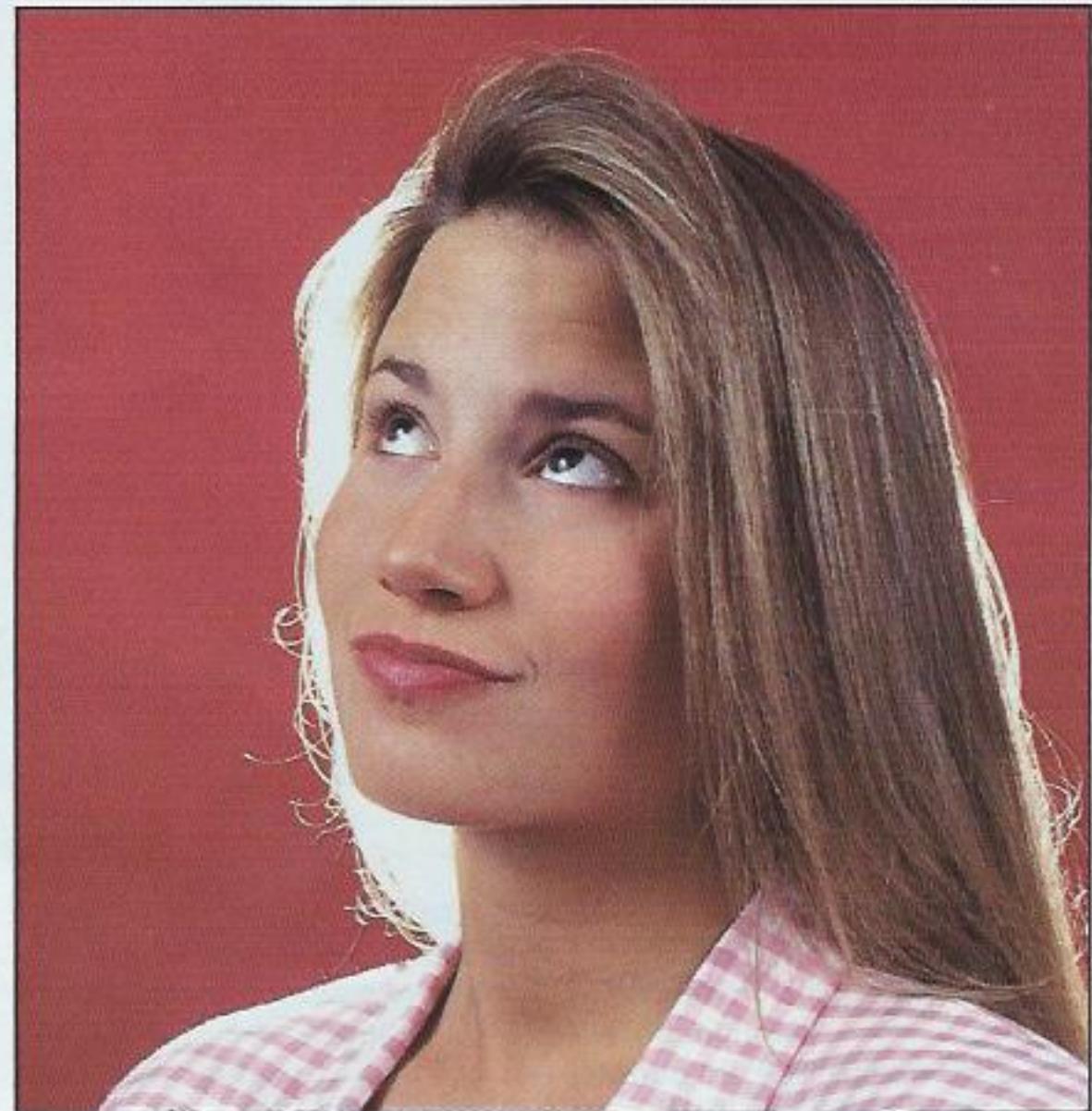


PHOTO BY JASON ROSS LAVIN

Things were looking up for Tammy Sytch at the time she came to our Pennsylvania offices for a photo shoot nearly 20 years ago. Before long, however, she was overwhelmed by the temptations that surround this business and by the tragic death of her long-time boyfriend, Chris Candido.



PHOTO BY GEORGE TAHINOS

no idea who they were at the time, as they were virtual nobodies in the business. They had just started working for Jim Cornette in Smoky Mountain Wrestling. Sutch used the ring surname Fytch because even though she toiled as an uppity, spoiled manager mostly in Tennessee and Kentucky for SMW, her name was still listed in

the phonebook in her native New Jersey. I remember her bringing her mom to the office with her for one photo shoot.

You could see she had something special, and it wasn't just the girl-next-door looks. Within a few years, she and Candido were in WWE, Sutch the company's hottest Diva. Her ascent to the top was amazing, her downward spiral even more stupefying. She has lived at least 50 years in the 20 years that have passed since I penned a simple two-page "Introducing" feature on her. It shows.

She memorably crashed and burned in WWE, and then again in ECW as Paul Heyman tried to give her a chance to salvage her career. A stint in WCW was also terribly forgettable. I remember a picture that one of our photographers took at the final Brian Pillman Memorial Show in 2001. I thought she looked so overwhelmed by her struggles that I was hesitant to run it in the magazine out of respect for her.

Candido died in 2005 (ironically and sadly just when he seemed to be ahead in his battle with substance abuse). Tammy and Missy

When Senior Writer Dave Lenker last saw Sutch, she was on hand at the 2011 Super 8 Tournament to crown the winner, Tommaso Ciampa. While Lenker got the impression that Tammy was trying a little too hard to hold on to her youth, her life seemed to be headed in the right direction at the time.

Hyatt featured themselves on an adult website for a while. We did a lengthy "Q & A" with Tammy a couple of years back, and she appeared to be doing well. WWE was inducting her into its Hall of Fame, and she was optimistic about another run there. It didn't happen.

I last saw her in person when she hosted the 2011 ECWA Super 8 Tournament. She looked good, but more than a little like the cliched aging starlet trying too hard to remain relevant and beautiful.

Just this week, I watched on youtube the tease of a tell-all interview video she did just before this most recent crash. She is uncomfortably candid in providing far too many details of her apparently-not-so-private life as the camera follows her around at various indy shows. She laughs about how, at age 39, she just put together a resume for the first time. Asked how Sutch is doing, Darling jokes, "Well, she's not blackout drunk right now ... I'd say she's doing just fine."

Not much humor there now.

"I feel good," she says cheerfully at one point. "Rehab does wonders. I recommend it to everyone."

At press time, that's where she was headed again, as her attorney convinced a judge to release her to a facility in Pennsylvania. WWE offered to cover the cost of her stay ... for a *fourth* time. How agonizing it must be for her family or any family in this kind of situation to endure this seemingly endless, tragic cycle. Even if rehab "works" this time, she'll always be just one slip away from erasing any progress she may have made. Plus, it appears she has no intention of giving up the wrestling gigs.

Even a cheerful message she posted on Facebook shortly thereafter could be interpreted as troubling:

"I'm off to rehab for 3 months! Not because I'm drinking again or hit rock bottom, but to get myself to the place I need and want to be ... I am well and happy! Looking forward to a new chapter in my life!"

No doubt some will interpret that as reeking of denial. I'm not qualified to make that judgment, but in any case, I'm still rooting for her.

"Tammy Sutch is not a punchline," said Varon. "She's a real person with a real struggle, and I hope that those around her realize the urgency of this situation." □

BORN BRYAN DANIELSON in Aberdeen, Washington, on May 22, 1981 ... Began training at Shawn Michaels' Texas Wrestling Academy after graduating from high school ... Debuted with HBK's Texas Wrestling Alliance, where he held tag team gold with Spanky (Brian Kendrick) ... Signed to a developmental deal by WWE and placed in the company's Memphis territory ... While there, honed his mat skills with William Regal ... Was released from his WWE contract in mid-2001 after the developmental system was retooled ... Competed for New Japan, where he wore a mask and adopted the name American Dragon ... Beat Low-Ki on October 27, 2001, to win All Pro Wrestling's King of the Indies tournament ... Wrestled in a three-way dance against Low-Ki (the winner) and Christopher Daniels in the main event of the first-ever Ring of Honor show on February 23, 2002 ... Introduced ROH audiences to his many submission holds, including his signature maneuver, the "Cattle Mutilation" ... Teamed with Curry Man (Daniels) to beat Jado and Gedo for the IWGP tag team championship in Tokyo on March 12, 2004 ... Beat CM Punk by submission at ROH's Reborn: Stage One ... Won the promotion's inaugural Survival of the Fittest match on June 24 ... Feuded with Homicide well into the following year ... They squared off in a brutal steel cage match at Final Showdown, which Bryan won by pinfall ... Fulfilled his dream on September 15, 2005, when he defeated James Gibson (Jamie Noble) for the ROH

heavyweight championship ... Began a 462-day reign, besting a wealth of challengers from around the globe ... Also wore the Full Impact Pro Heavyweight belt for most of 2006 ... Knocked out ROH Pure champ Nigel McGuinness in a bloody title unification match on August 12 ... Ultimately dropped

... Emerged as a rookie (albeit with a decade of experience) for WWE's NXT brand in February ... Was released by WWE for violently choking announcer Justin Roberts during a memorable Nexus uprising ... After touring the indy circuit for most of that summer re-signed with WWE and made

a surprise return at SummerSlam, teaming with John Cena to combat his former Nexus allies ... Defeated The Miz for the U.S. championship in September 2010 ... Fared admirably until March 2011, when he lost the belt to Sheamus ... Moved to Smackdown and won the brand's Money in the Bank match on July 17 ... Cashed in his briefcase at December's TLC Event, where he pinned Big Show to capture the World title ... Began taking cowardly shortcuts to win his matches, while his "YES! YES! YES!" catchphrase gained steam ... Retained the World title at Royal Rumble and Elimination Chamber, before ultimately losing it to Sheamus in 0:18 at WrestleMania 28 ... Targeted CM Punk and the WWE championship, but failed to win the strap in a series of close battles ... Went through a very public breakup with his fiancee, A.J. Lee ... Pinned Kane at SummerSlam 2012 ... The two formed an unlikely tag team, and, at Night of Champions on September 16, they defeated R-Truth and Kofi Kingston for the WWE tag team championship ... Despite being perhaps the most quarrelsome combo in the sport's history, "Hell No" led a resurgence of tag team wrestling in WWE as 2012 was drawing to a close.



Sheamus gets a good sense of what it feels like to get leather pounded into your face during a July streetfight on Raw. Though not a large man by WWE standards, Bryan is very powerful and arguably the most versatile man in the sport for the better part of the past decade.

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DANIEL BRYAN

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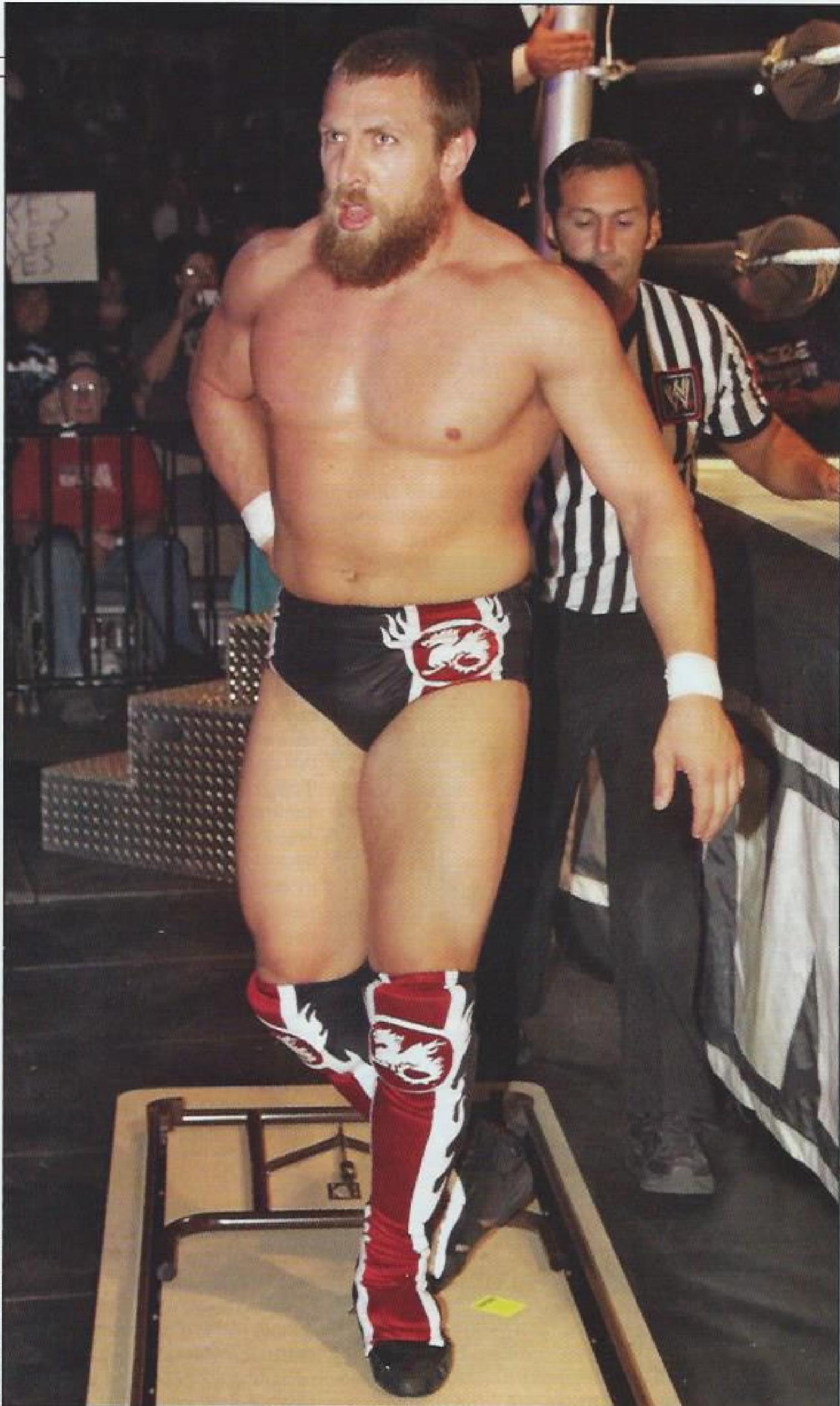


PHOTO BY WAYNE McCARTY

plain speaking

With Matt Brock

**Harder than nails,
veteran wrestling reporter
Matt Brock has logged more
miles covering wrestling
than any other journalist.
Every month Matt will travel
to the sport's hotbeds,
reporting everything he
sees without fear or favor**

POUGHKEEPSIE, NY: Not sure I'd have made the trip to see Tommy Dreamer's special House of Hardcore show if it was in Podunk rather than Poughkeepsie, which is, for all intents and purposes, just down the street to a scribe who has logged as many miles as Matt Brock over the past half-century. ¶ Another trip down Nostalgia Boulevard ECW-style, it seemed. And it was, with the FBI and Danny Doring and Roadkill renewing a rivalry (nod to Doring and Roadkill this time), and former

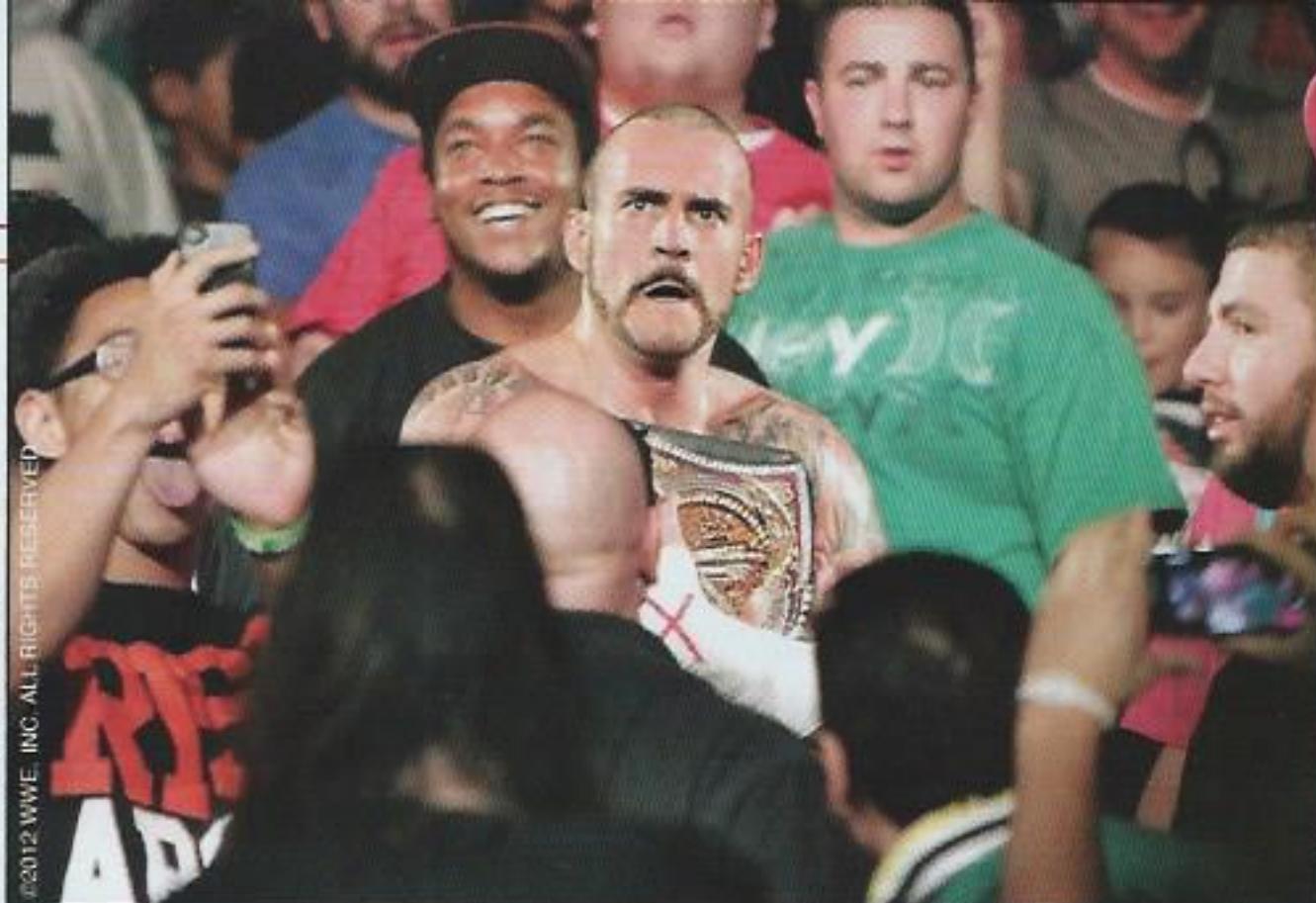
ECW stalwarts Jazz (vs. Winter) and Rhino (vs. Sami Callihan) recording wins. Edge seemed a bit out of place at this show, as he cut a promo and hyped what turned out to be a fantastic tag match between Paul London and Brian Kendrick (how are they not in WWE or TNA today?) against The Young Bucks, though he put off neck surgery to do so, which was admirable. Bringing back the old Master-lock challenge with Chris (Masters) Mordetsky felt odd as well. ¶ All in all, an assortment of mostly entertaining stuff made for money well-spent by the nearly 2,000 in attendance. Everyone seemed happy with the main event, with Carlito showing the skills that made him a pretty big star in WWE not long ago en route to victory over Dreamer and Mike Knox for the FWE title. ¶ Chants of "E-C-W!" early in the night morphed into those of "H-O-H!" and "Thank you, Tom-my!" by night's end. I've been skeptical of these quasi-ECW revival efforts of late, but this show and the most recent ones by Shane Douglas have been damn solid. And remember, Dreamer and Douglas don't have delusional national aspirations here. When the fans are clearly happy at the end of the show, that's really what matters, and none of our over-analysis of it all is worth a pound of turnbuckle stuffing. ¶ HOH will be back in 2013, Dreamer insisted. I just might be, too.

FISHKILL, NY: Perish the thought, but we might never see Hulk Hogan and Roddy Piper in the same ring together again, so given my wistful fondness (note to younger readers: that's called sarcasm) for the old Rock 'n' Wrestling Connection of three decades ago, I couldn't resist the temptation of taking in a Northeast Wrestling show that prom-



DREAMER CONGRATULATES CARLITO ON FWE TITLE WIN

PHOTO BY GEORGE TAHINDS



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ised some sort of confrontation between the aging icons. ¶ Not like there was much new ground for these two to break, but a fight was teased, as Piper again pointed out how Hogan never would have been anything had he not had such a bitter/worthy foil as "The Rowdy Scot." An old argument, but true. ¶ Think I zoned out a few times during this 30-minute segment (felt like 90 at times), but the folks at Dutchess Stadium ate it up. No hugs were traded at this minor league ballpark, but Hogan and Piper did shake hands at the end. ¶ As for the show, well, it ain't every day or even every decade that you see a wrestling show endure a rain delay, but we got one here thanks to a thundershower that packed some punch. ¶ Amusing to see NEW champ Brian Anthony and Matt Taven take their falls-count-anywhere bout (half of which took place after the rain delay) on top of one of the dugouts for a few minutes. Matt Hardy (who is working his way back onto the national radar) and Sami Callihan smartly stayed out of the ring for most of their slippery match. ¶ Rest of the show featured some big names, which is the norm for NEW, including Lita, who refereed a Madison Rayne and Rosita vs. Angelina Love and Velvet Sky match, and Vader, who crushed Tony Nese. ¶ Pretty memorable show because of the rain and the Hogan stuff. Hope the big oaf got someone to tape it for him.

SACRAMENTO, CA: Barely a month after Jerry Lawler suffered that heart attack during an episode of *Raw* on which he wrestled, prompting some to question whether 62-year-olds belong in the ring at all, 67-year-old Vincent K. McMahon tabbed himself for the

main event of another memorable Monday night contest. Let's hope it's the last time he dusts off his ring gear. ¶ A feud with CM Punk is hardly the kick-start WWE needs, but you get the feeling if the ratings are tumbling again 30 years from now, 97-year-old VKM might challenge John Cena III or whoever is WWE's top star at the time if he thinks it'll add half a point to a Nielsen number. Hard to believe that technically, Vince is a 14-year veteran, as it was 1998 when he first took to the ring to face Steve Austin. ¶ Subtle rumblings continue to point to an eventual showdown between Punk and "Stone-Cold" Steve Austin, which might be another interesting but shortsighted fix for the company's malaise. I'd like to see what Punk could do with a three-year run with the WWE title, but I doubt we'll get that ever again. ¶ This was also the show where Punk struck a fan while hightailing it through the crowd. You might not want my take on that, but here goes anyway: If you touch one of the wrestlers, you're an idiot, and pretty much whatever happens next is your problem, not some seedy lawyer's. A generation or two ago, hardly a fan would have ever touched a wrestler for fear of not making it home in one piece. Nowadays they see dollar signs. Fortunately, it

looks like no legal action will be taken by anyone this time. ¶ Let's pray there is no next time.

PHOENIX, AZ: Raise your hand and be counted if you were hoping this bizarre Aces & Eights invasion of TNA would yield another chapter in the Bully Ray vs. Devon feud. Not seeing many hands raised out there. ¶ Nevertheless, I'm still intrigued as to where the whole thing is going. Aces & Eights are clearly a pretty smart and devious faction if they were able to get this far with their hostile takeover. And they managed to outfox and beat Sting and Bully Ray here at Bound For Glory after Hulk Hogan decreed the tag match a no-DQ bout and Bully Ray ended up going through a table and getting himself pinned. Thus, the Aces are in TNA to stay. For now at least. ¶ For half a second I was worried that Hogan himself was going to be revealed as the mastermind, and TNA was going to transport us back to WCW in 1996. ¶ Of course, this new band of hooded evildoers took the requisite slow-motion beating from the "Hulkster" in the process, but it was a good night for them overall. Now comes the tricky part of turning this thing into something more than just your run-of-the-mill NWO-style invasion that we've seen ad nauseam. Good luck with that. □

STEVE AUSTIN:

"I'll never sell out, I'll never get a big head, and that's the bottom line!"

HIS LATEST MOVIE, *MAXIMUM CONVICTION*, WAS JUST RELEASED, BUT STEVE AUSTIN VOWS HE'LL NEVER DEVELOP A HOLLYWOOD EGO. IN THIS SPECIAL FEATURE, AUSTIN EXPLAINS WHY HE STAYS HUMBLE DESPITE HIS SUCCESS IN WRESTLING AND BEYOND

By Harry Burkett

STONE-COLD" HAS felt like a caged animal as of late, thanks to comprehensive knee surgery he underwent this past summer. He missed *Raw*'s 1,000th episode and spent more time than usual cooped up at his home in Los Angeles. Grueling rehab sessions became the social events of his week. Rattlesnakes don't enjoy being kept in captivity, and the original "Texas Rattlesnake," Steve Austin, is no different.

He wanted a few projects to pass the time, and agreed to sign 35,000 picture cards for THQ's special "Austin 3:16" edition of the *WWE '13* video-game. "When you write 'Stone-Cold Steve Austin' 35,000 times, sumbitch, it gets a little old," confided Austin in an exclusive interview. "After five hours, your hand just kind of hits the wall, it won't even work anymore. You just have to quit for an hour or two, get somethin' to eat and hit it again, and after about 10 crappy signatures, it'll come back online. It's hard as hell sittin' around and signin' your name all day. But I'm particular about this sort of thing, so I wanted to do a good job. I guaran-damn-tee to anybody who buys one of these damn things, I'm the one who signed every single one of those son of a bitches."

Austin's life is much different now than it was during his wrestling days. As grueling as it was to go from one city to another, from one connecting flight to another, from one rental car to another, from one hotel room to another, it was a routine nonetheless. His fellow performers and other WWE personnel offered familiarity and camaraderie.

Today, Austin's life is an endless series of independent projects, with his schedule planned not just weeks in advance, but months and years. Each project consists of a different crew in a different locale. Only one month after surgery, Austin filmed his part in *Grown Ups 2*, starring Adam Sandler. Fortunately

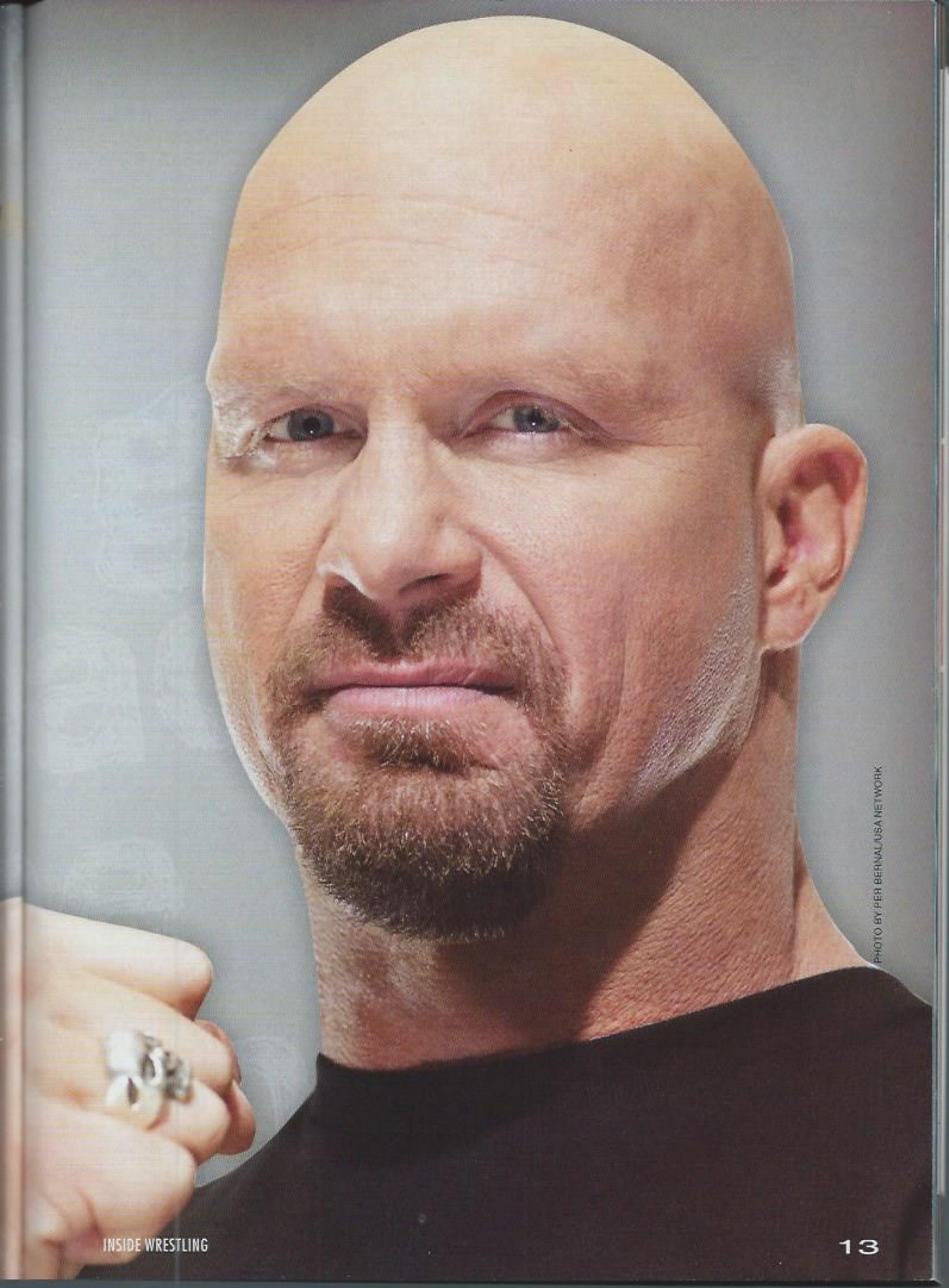
for "Stone-Cold," his role didn't require much use of his tender knee. By September, Austin had regained stability and mobility in his knee and was relatively pain-free, just in time to fly to Mexico and spend several weeks shooting the second season of his reality series, *Redneck Island*. One of CMT's top-rated shows, *Redneck Island* features 12 men and women in *Survivor*-style competitions that include shooting, fishing, bowling, and beer runs.

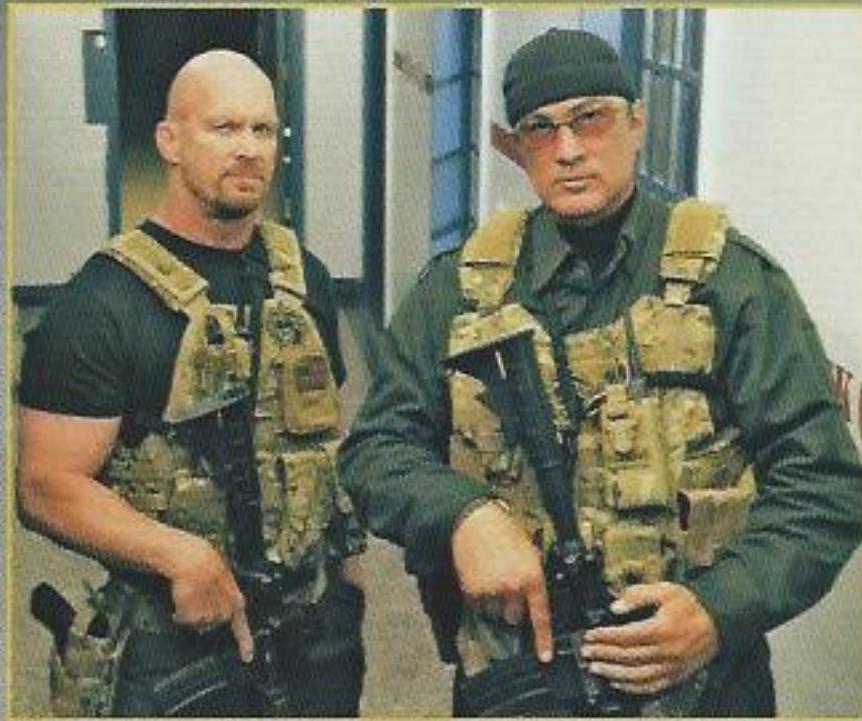
Austin's proudest achievement this year is co-starring with Steven Seagal in *Maximum Conviction*, which was released on DVD and Blu-ray in November. Filmed in Vancouver, British Columbia, the action takes place inside an old prison, where Seagal and Austin, who are playing former black ops operatives, are assigned to oversee the arrival of two female prisoners suspected of carrying CIA secrets. When mercenaries assault the prison to capture the women, Seagal and Austin spearhead the counter-attack. Shell casings fly and faces are busted in the 90-minute action thriller.

In one scene, one of the female prisoners opens a can of whoop-ass on Austin and overwhelms him with a Ninja-style assault, leaving him dazed on the floor. When the woman is fatally shot near the end of the movie, Austin walks up and asks, "Which one of you [expletives deleted] killed my future ex-wife?" Austin and Seagal exhibit great chemistry, and the movie's conclusion teases the possibility of a sequel.

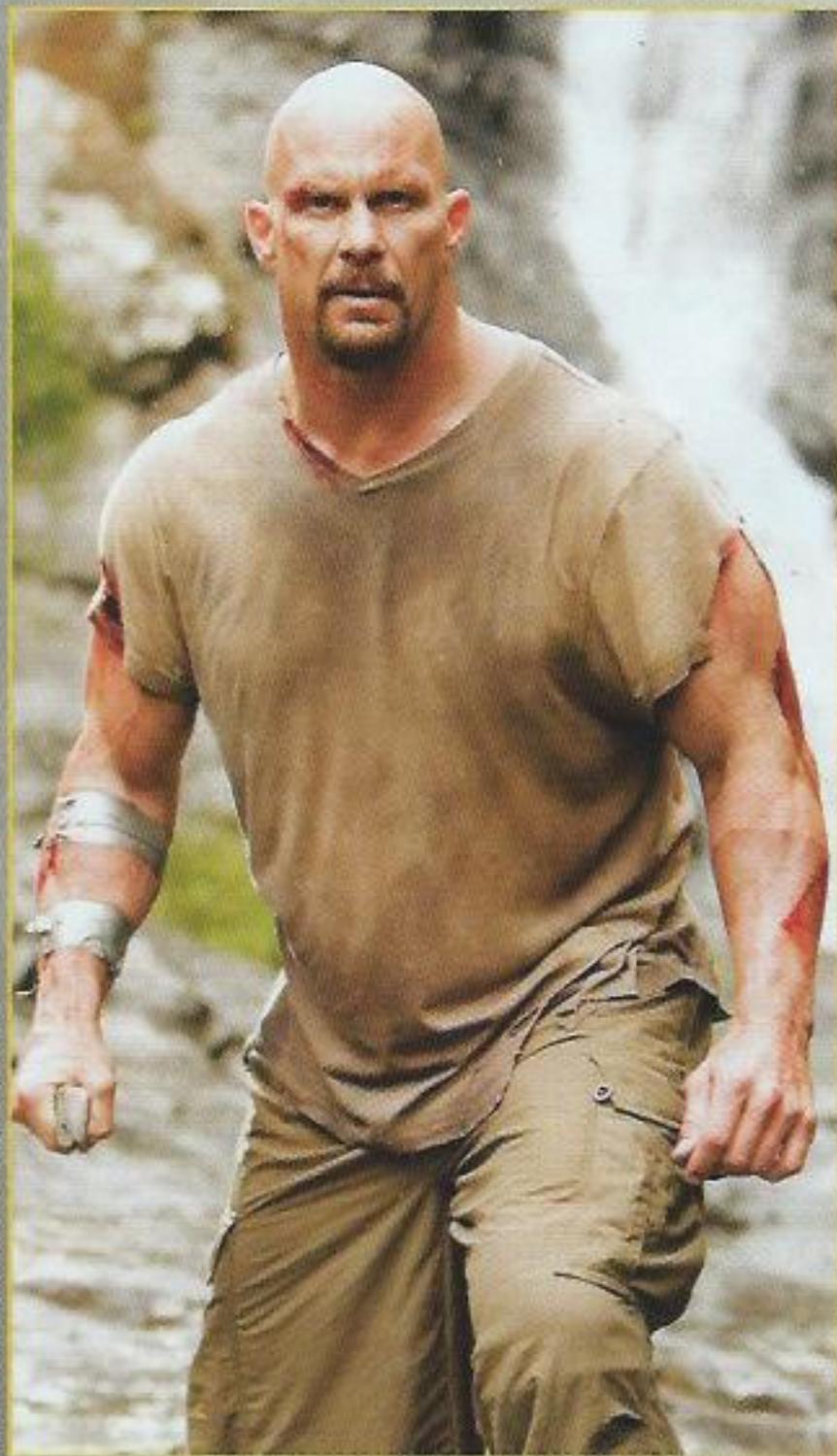
"I've been a big Steven Seagal fan for a long time, since he started making action movies back in the day," said Austin. "What I enjoyed most about this movie was the opportunity to work with Steve. The time was right on that project, and I jumped on board."

Austin has worked with several





With the WWE tag team division as hot as it is, would Steve Austin be able to do some damage with his *Maximum Conviction* co-star, Steven Seagal? If they were able to use those weapons, they'd mow down everyone!



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"Stone-Cold" fought other convicts for the prize of freedom in his first starring role, *The Condemned*. While Austin is enjoying his second career as a screen actor, his first love is and will always be professional wrestling.

notables—including Danny Trejo, Vinnie Jones, and Eric Roberts—since his debut starring effort, *The Condemned*, was released in 2007. But it was his role in *The Expendables* that allowed him to share billing with the top tier of the action genre, including Sylvester Stallone, Jet Li, and Dolph Lundgren. Even cold-as-ice Austin had to get excited by that company, right?

"I've had the chance to rub shoulders with a lot of folks and I'm certainly not star-struck by anybody," replied Austin. "I had a lot of respect for Sly Stallone. From being that kid runnin' down the road and eatin' raw eggs after seeing *Rocky*, thinking I was going to be the next heavyweight champion of the world, to working with the guy, it was a fun process. Before I got into the acting business, I thought a lot of these guys were a bunch of sissies and overpaid and obnoxious (*laughs*). Hey, man, there's people out here who roll up their sleeves and pay a lot of dues and have a lot of talent and work a lot of hours. My respect and appreciation for the people involved in this endeavor has changed dramatically."

Anyone who watched *Tough Enough* understands that Austin is a master of ring psychology and a stickler for detail. From his bad-ass walk to the ring to the badge on his vest as the "sheriff" of *Raw*, Austin knew that every prop, every movement, and every inflection of his voice conveyed a message to the fans. He knew what to do at the beginning, middle, and end of every match. This command of his craft is what put him on top of the industry in the late-1990s. When pressed, Austin admits that he doesn't approach his movie career with same level of scrutiny, instead leaving the details to the script-writers, directors, and fellow actors with far more experience. He can still watch an action movie for entertainment's sake, but if he happens to see a wrestling match or wrestling promo on TV, he can't help but view it through the prism of 20 years' experience in the business.

That's the bottom line on "Stone-Cold": He may be enjoying a very successful career as an action star, but inside him still beats the heart of a professional wrestler.

Those in attendance at the Cauliflower Alley Club's annual convention in Las Vegas earlier this year would agree with that statement. Good friend Jim Ross presented Austin with the CAC's highest honor, the Iron Mike Award (named after wrestler/actor Mike Mazurki), and "Stone-Cold" responded with a gracious speech. Austin's respect for the legends in the room was genuine, and, even now, he's careful not to place his accomplishments above those who came before him.

"I was super-hot for a period of time and generated a damn sh__ ball of money within the industry, and took the business to a height it's never seen before, but when I look at the careers of Ric Flair,

Randy Savage, Ricky Steamboat, Hulk Hogan, Bruno Sammartino, many guys have had great, great careers," admitted Austin. "I had a hellacious run, but I don't think I had the best run ever. I certainly would've stuck around another five years before I got out of the business, but everything just started catchin' up to me by that time."

His bad knees, for example. His black knee braces were ever-present, along with his black trunks and black boots. That's why Austin had to visit the Kerlan-Jobe Orthopaedic Clinic in Los Angeles this past summer, and why Dr. Neal ElAttrache had to use grafts from cadaver donor tissue to repair his anterior cruciate and posterior cruciate ligaments in his left knee. Last year, he spent six weeks recovering from reconstructive surgery on his left shoulder. Then there was Owen Hart's botched piledriver at SummerSlam '97 that caused spinal shock syndrome in the short term and recurring neurological problems that ended his career.

Knee problems, neurological problems, personal problems ... all of it combined to drive the "Bionic Redneck" out of the business in 2002. In the decade since, time away from the business has done Austin good. He's eating healthier and watching his waistline—that means he's discovered sushi bars and now drinks Bud Light. He isn't running through life quite as hard.

And if one is curious to know the heart of "Stone-Cold," look no further than his home in Tilden, Texas: the Broken Skull Ranch. Located 75 miles south of San Antonio along the Nueces River, the Broken Skull Ranch is a 2,100-acre hunting haven, with deer, hogs, bobcats, and even a mountain lion or two. Austin has poured plenty of blood, sweat, and



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Austin received congratulations from John Cena upon being inducted into the WWE Hall of Fame in 2009. Cena certainly would have gotten a lot of attention if he had pulled "Stone-Cold" off the stage!

dollars into the place, putting in roads, building several structures, and connecting eight miles of PVC pipe for his water troughs.

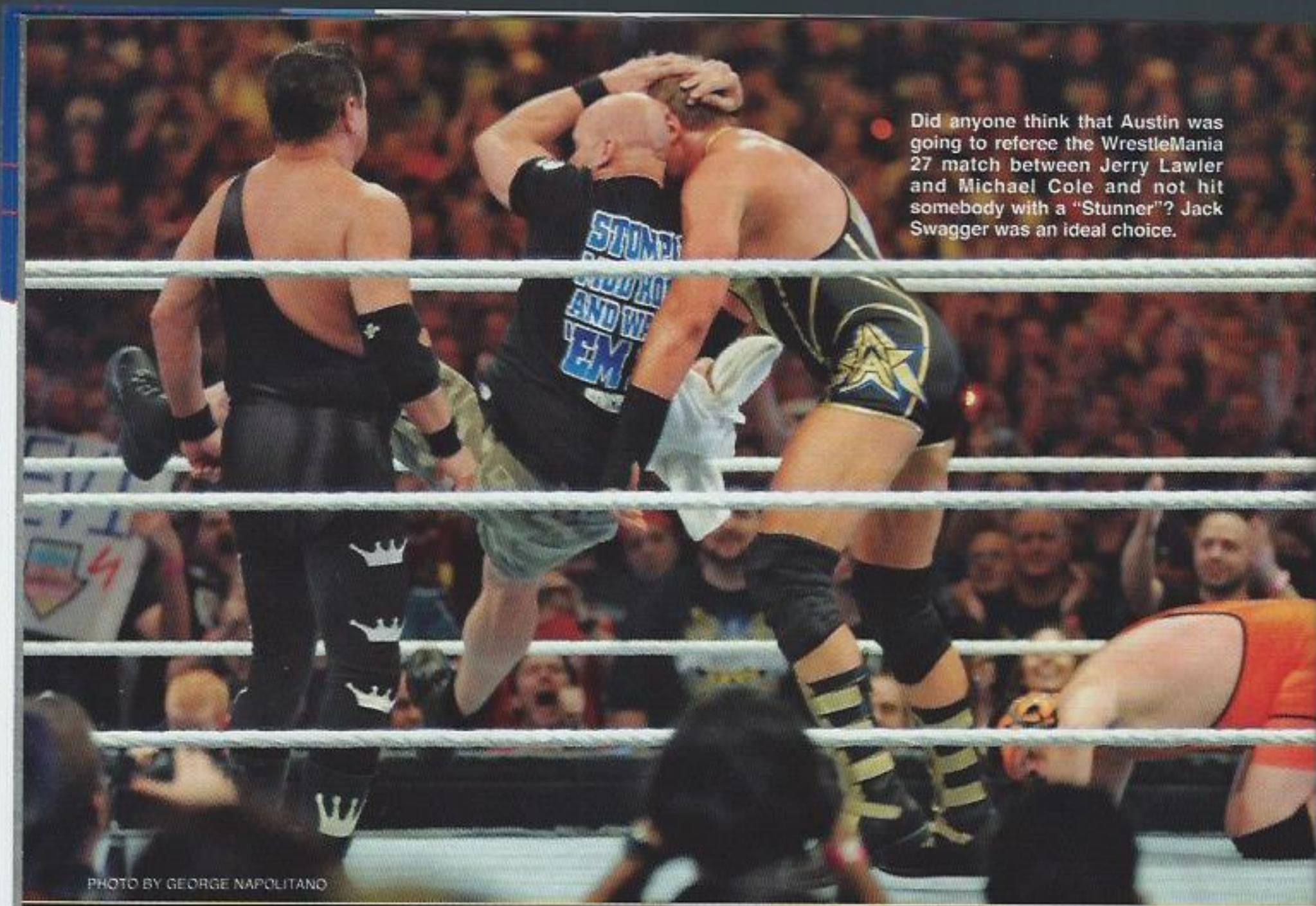
Austin has recreated the Broken Skull Ranch (at least in the virtual sense) on the Internet at broken-skullranch.com. He posts images of his latest hunting



PHOTO COURTESY OF FOX NEWS

BRING THE PAIN AUSTIN DOES "DAMAGE" IN HIS LATEST FILM

Austin makes an appearance on *Fox & Friends* to promote the release of *Damage*, in which he plays an ex-con who enters MMA competition to earn money for his daughter's operation.



Did anyone think that Austin was going to referee the WrestleMania 27 match between Jerry Lawler and Michael Cole and not hit somebody with a "Stunner"? Jack Swagger was an ideal choice.

PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

Austin poses with the two finalists from 2011's *Tough Enough* competition on the USA Network. Austin did his best to advise all the contestants throughout the series, but neither runner-up Luke Robinson (left) nor winner Andy Leavine ever made it to WWE.

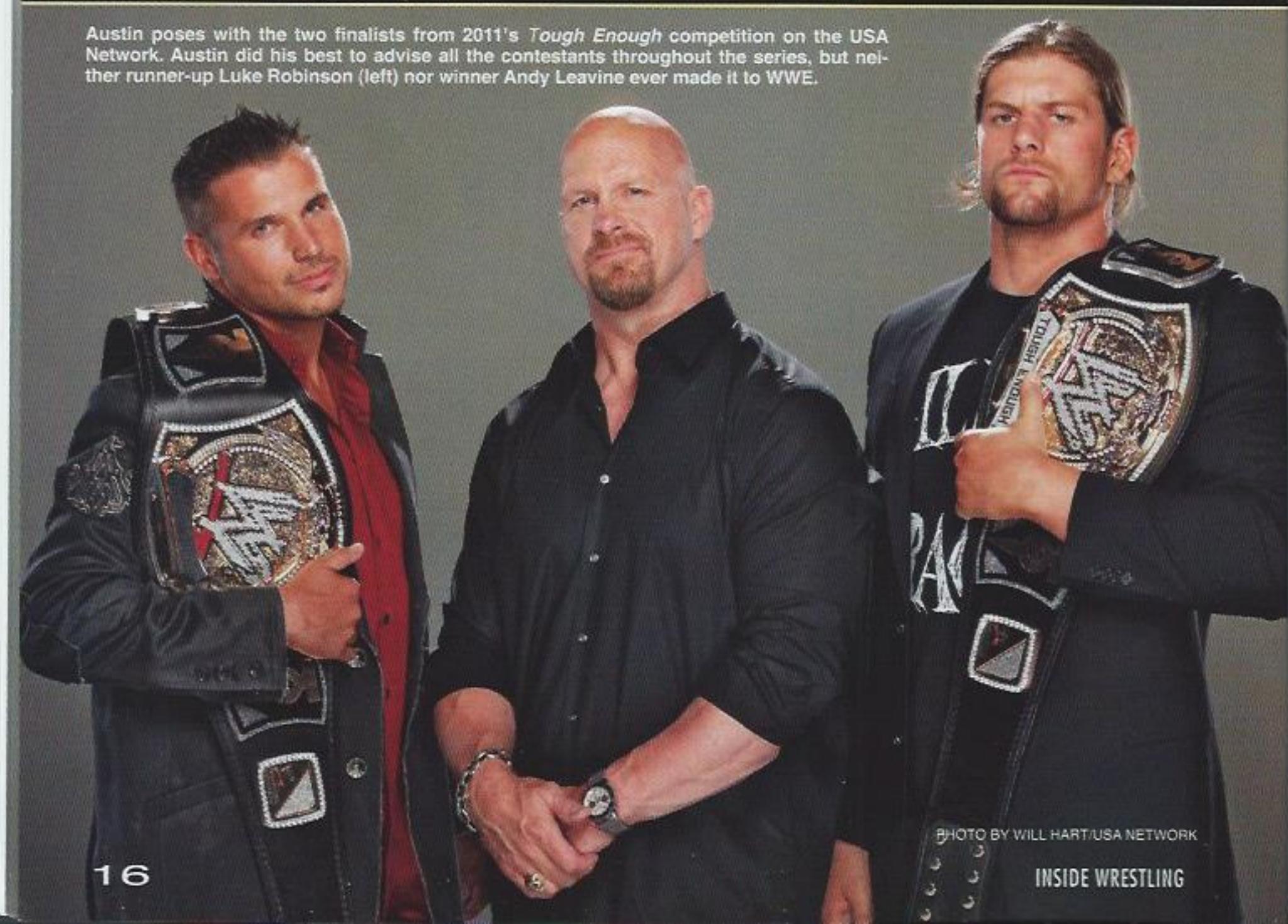


PHOTO BY WILL HART/USA NETWORK

trophies, updates visitors on the latest improvements at the ranch, and keeps a blog. He even sells BSR gear, including hats, T-shirts, and hoodies. This has been a clever way for Austin to develop a merchandising line that is independent of the WWE branding machine and more reflective of his true personality.

As much as Austin finds solace in South Texas, he doesn't spend as much time there as one would assume. He may squeeze in five or six trips to the ranch each year, and, if his schedule permits, he might spend as many as 30 days there during deer season. He hopes to spend the final two months of 2012 just hunting and relaxing at the ranch, which would be a record for him.

Peace, quiet, and solitude. Austin should feel invigorated heading into 2013. And that begs the question that Austin hears all the time: Is there a chance that "Stone-Cold" will return to the ring?

"I would never say never," he responded. "But am I actively trying to pitch a match or sell a match? No. I'm cool with what I did. I've pretty much got it out of my system."

Not even a Stunner for John Cena?

"Stunner ol' John Cena, that little rascal? Hell, I got a couple stunners built up for that entire lockerroom. Some of 'em need a Stunner just for motivation purposes only, so they can blow the head out of their asses

and start gettin' over. I have a lot of respect for John Cena for carrying that company. Some people love to hate him. Some people love to love him. But they all respect him, and, that guy, I must say he's got a smile on his face and he just works tirelessly for that company. I think he's had a good run. I'd enjoy givin' him a stunner. He's the perfect guy to take it."

The same ol' "Stone-Cold." Okay, he eats sushi now. He's been spotted sipping some red wine out in Napa Valley. He lives in Hollywood most of the time. But has he gone Hollywood? Friends closest to Austin insist he has not. And Austin is adamant that he hasn't changed.

"I used to get pissed off at guys who were a year or two in the wrestling business, still jerkin' the curtain, but because they were on *Monday Night Raw*, they expected to get special treatment at the airport, get their nose wiped and their ass powdered because they were on TV. My parents raised me to keep my head on straight, never live beyond your means, and don't believe your own bulls_____. I don't go for b.s. photo ops, make all the tabloids, kiss nobody's ass—it ain't in my DNA makeup. I'm frugal with my money and I know the value of a dollar. No, I'll never sell out, I'll never get a big head, and that's the bottom line."

And that's exactly why fans love the "Texas Rattlesnake," still humble after all these years—even if his language remains a bit colorful. □



Austin doesn't like The Miz, but, frankly, the former WWE champion wouldn't provide enough incentive for "Stone-Cold" to make a comeback. Cena? CM Punk? The Rock? Now there may be something to talk about!

CONTENTS

HARDY'S PRESSURE

**Is Hardy's Shell Hard Enough
To Endure What's To Come?**

Jeff Hardy says he won't crack under the strain of Aries' head games and a roster rife with intrigue. His newly won TNA World title belt is a symbol of his rebuilt life and he's not going to surrender it easily

By Mike Bessler

IT WAS HARDLY unexpected. If Jeff Hardy has proven one thing time and again throughout the course of his career, it's that he has an uncanny ability to face down incredible odds and adversity, always finding his way back to the top of the mountain. His stellar performances throughout TNA's 2012 Bound For Glory Series were a virtual *tour de force* of Hardy's unique in-ring talents, offering wrestling fans an in-depth look at a more polished and determined incarnation of the "Charismatic Enigma." By the time Hardy took center stage at the Grand Canyon University Arena in Phoenix, Arizona, to face World champion Austin Aries at Bound For Glory, he'd already weathered some rather significant personal and professional challenges. And although Aries fought with every bit of grit that he's known to possess, it was Hardy who emerged with an incredibly hard-fought and much-deserved victory.

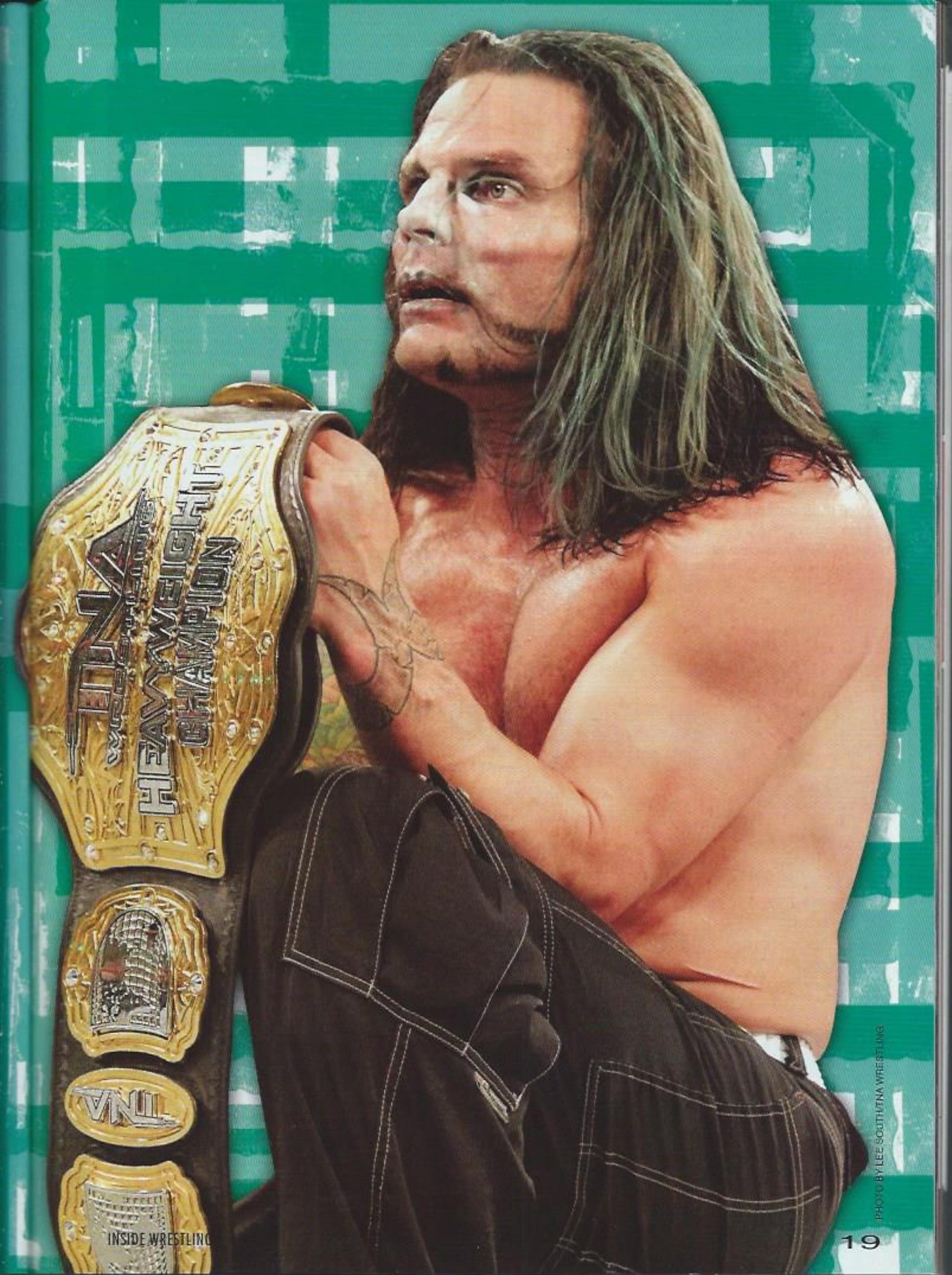
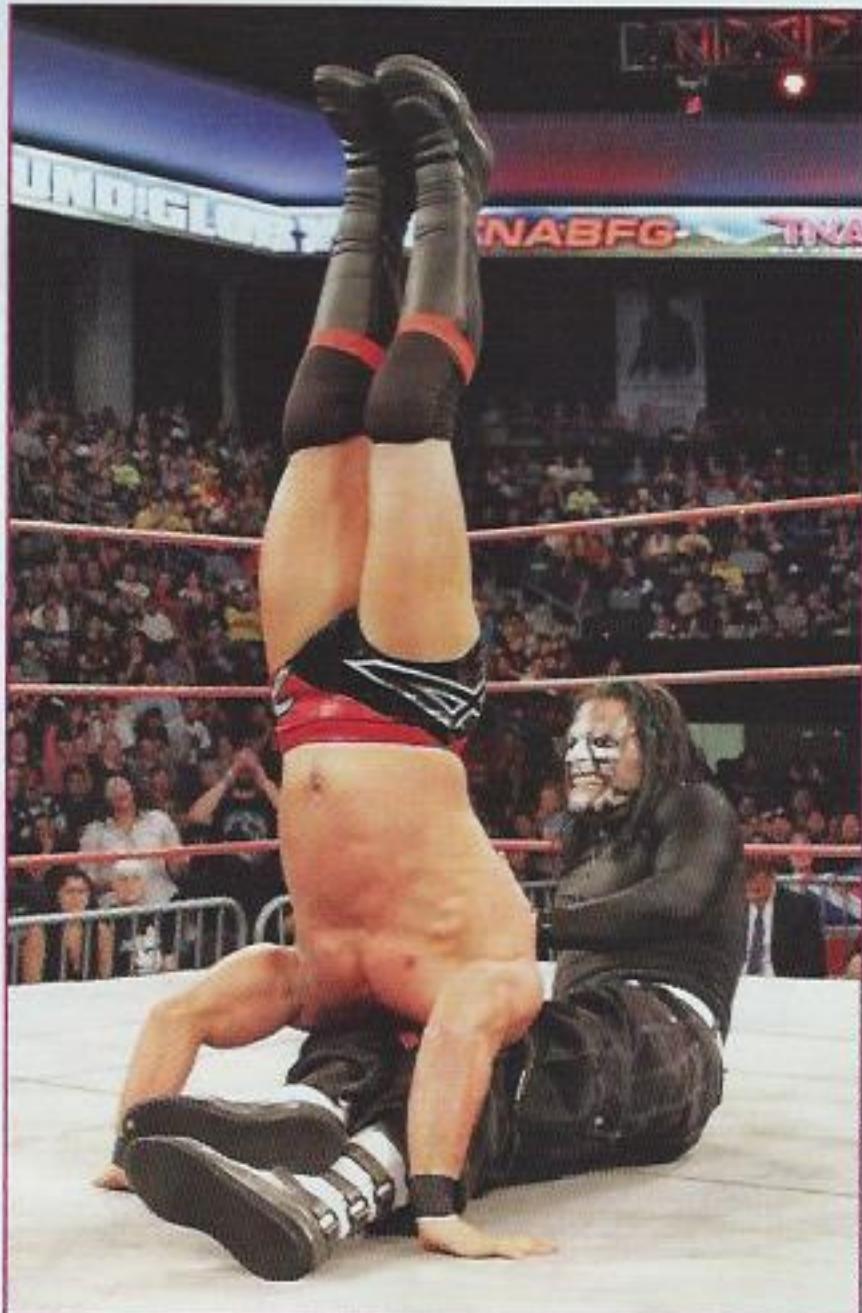


PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/TNA WRESTLING

Of course, it was far from a foregone conclusion that Hardy would emerge with the strap from his first shot at the title in over six months. Aries had spent the better parts of 2011 and 2012 establishing himself as one of the most formidable opponents on the TNA roster and was an odds-on favorite to retain the strap at Bound For Glory. But while both grapplers match up well with regard to in-ring abilities, one of the most pronounced differences between these men—both with regard to their championship match and beyond—is that of attitude. Even in defeat, Aries remains self-righteous and cocksure. Hardy, by comparison, seems to have benefited immensely from a newfound outlook that balances copious amounts of humility with heartfelt gratitude.

"It's a long way back from Hell," explains Jeff. "I'm like most other people; I've done my fair share of soul-searching and I've come to realize that I don't have all of the answers, but then again, I also don't have to rely on the aspirations and agendas of businessmen and political types to find my path to greatness. I'm following my heart this time, and I think the results thus far speak volumes."

Not everyone is on the Hardy bandwagon, though. When Hardy returned to the Impact Zone following his big win at Bound For Glory, he was joined in the center of the ring by a vindictive "A-Double," who mocked and chided the new champion, sullying an otherwise triumphant homecoming. It was at this encounter that Aries presented Hardy not with a definitive challenge, but an ominous threat: Rather than seize upon his earliest opportunity for



Hardy momentarily immobilizes Aries with a headscissors, but the champ is able to neatly escape by maneuvering his body into a headstand position and sliding away.

PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/TNA WRESTLING



PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/TNA WRESTLING

Aries seemed well on his way to another successful defense when he connected with this dropkick (left) and was able to take advantage of Hardy's precarious positioning on the turnbuckles (right).

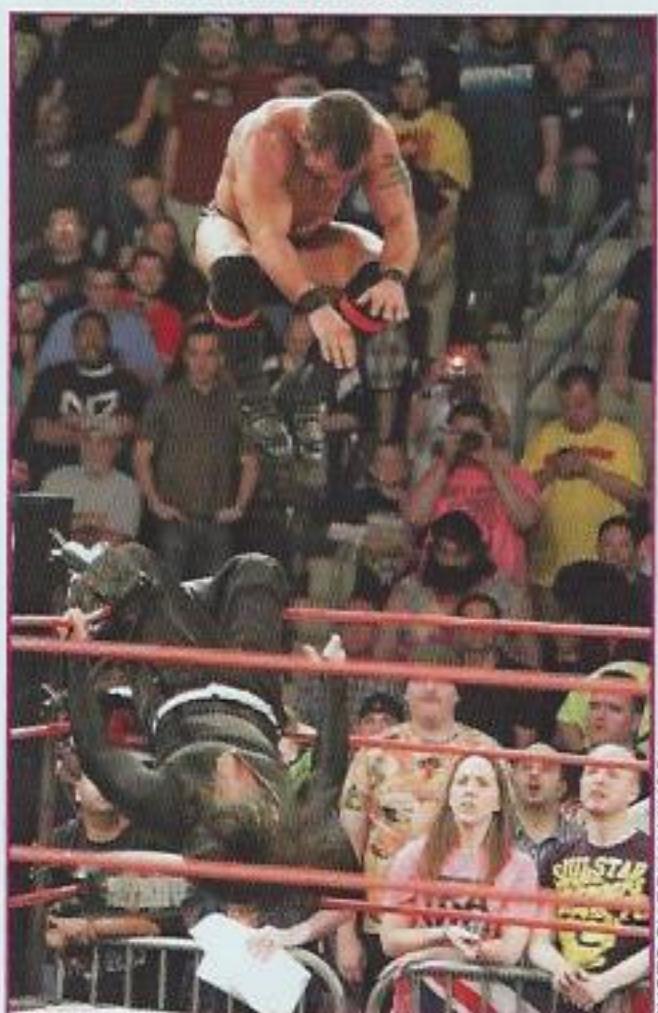


PHOTO BY BRIAN MINSON

a rematch, Aries coyly announced that he'd keep Hardy guessing for the time being as to when and where he'd make a run at the gold.

Coming off the tense confrontation with Hardy, Aries made little secret of a strategy that relies heavily on theatrics, opportunism, and a palpable and sustained air of acrimony. "It's always a good day to be Austin Aries," blusters the former champ. "But these days it's especially great because I'm in complete control of the situation. I'm calling all the shots from now on. I'd say Jeffrey needs to grow eyes in the back of his head, but he's already got a second set painted on his eyelids for some stupid reason. It doesn't matter. He still won't see me coming."

In addition to Aries' posturing and head games, Hardy also must contend with new, emerging threats, as well as challenges from some familiar rivals. The omnipresent threat of Aces & Eights has kept the TNA lockerroom on pins and needles for months, playing havoc with the psyches of the company's most seasoned of veterans. It's a relative certainty that they will eventually turn their collective attention to capturing the World championship, and although Hardy's one of the toughest guys in wrestling today, he'd surely have a hard time beating back Aces & Eights on his own.

The intrigue that permeates every echelon of the Impact Zone is not limited to the resentments of a vanquished champion and the whims of a roving gang. Challenges to Hardy's status as the new TNA standard-bearer reside at virtually every turn. Samoa Joe, enjoying a fresh stint of dominance as TV champ, is sure to see his current success as an acid test for a future run at the World title.

Perhaps one of the most imminent and plausible threats to Hardy is "Cowboy" James Storm. Battle hardened from a long and brutal feud with former tag partner Bobby Roode, Storm has publicly declared his intent to reclaim the TNA World title as his own. "I respect the man," says Storm, "but that doesn't mean I can't beat him in the ring. At the end of the day, he's just one more guy standing between me and my title."

With so many of TNA's heavy hitters vying for the chance to get their hands on Hardy and his title, one might think that the champ is sure to buckle under the strain. "Me? I'm calm like a bomb," he laughs. "One thing I've learned from this business is that it's always good to be in demand. The fact that I have a line of guys waiting for the chance to knock me off my perch means that I've got the one thing that they want most. Come one, come all. And good luck taking it away from me, boys."

Indeed, Hardy seems to relish the covetous overtures of his peers. It's not for lack of trying, but clearly Hardy's foes have a long way to go before they gain any semblance of a psychological edge against one of wrestling's coolest competitors. □

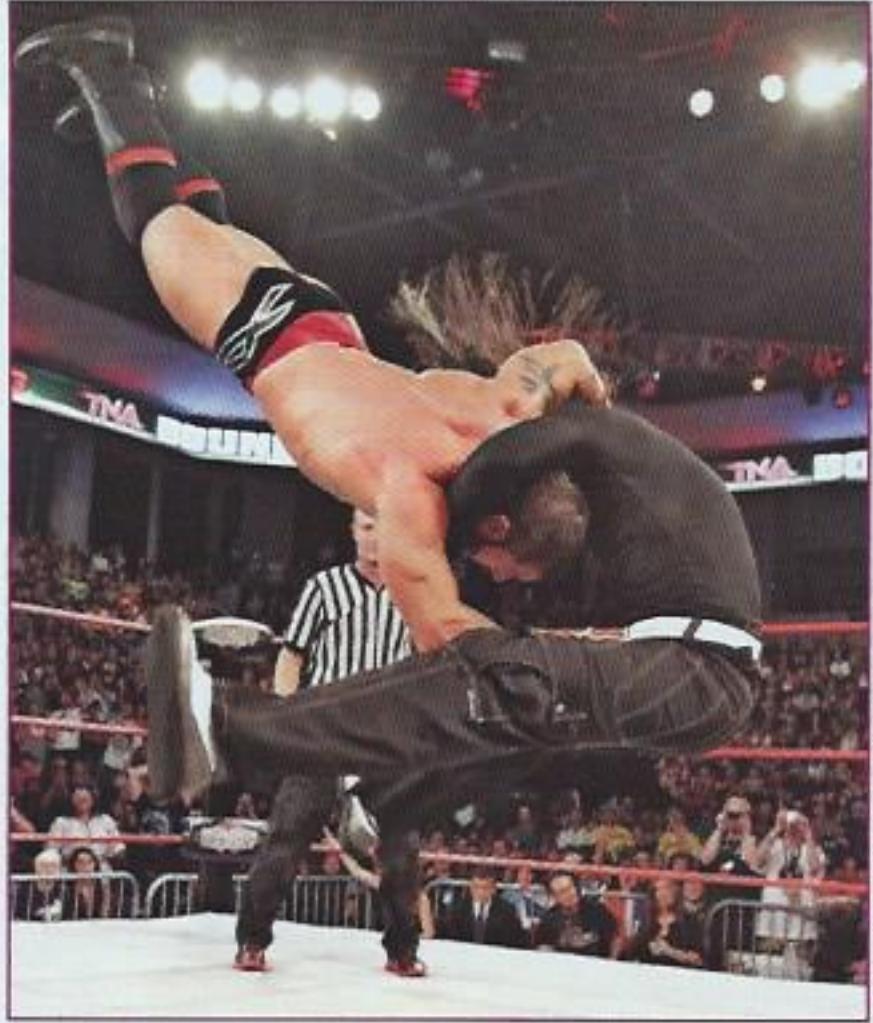


PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/TNA WRESTLING

Hardy takes the last bit of fight out of the champion (above), who can do nothing but watch the incoming challenger seal the deal with a Swanton Bomb (below).

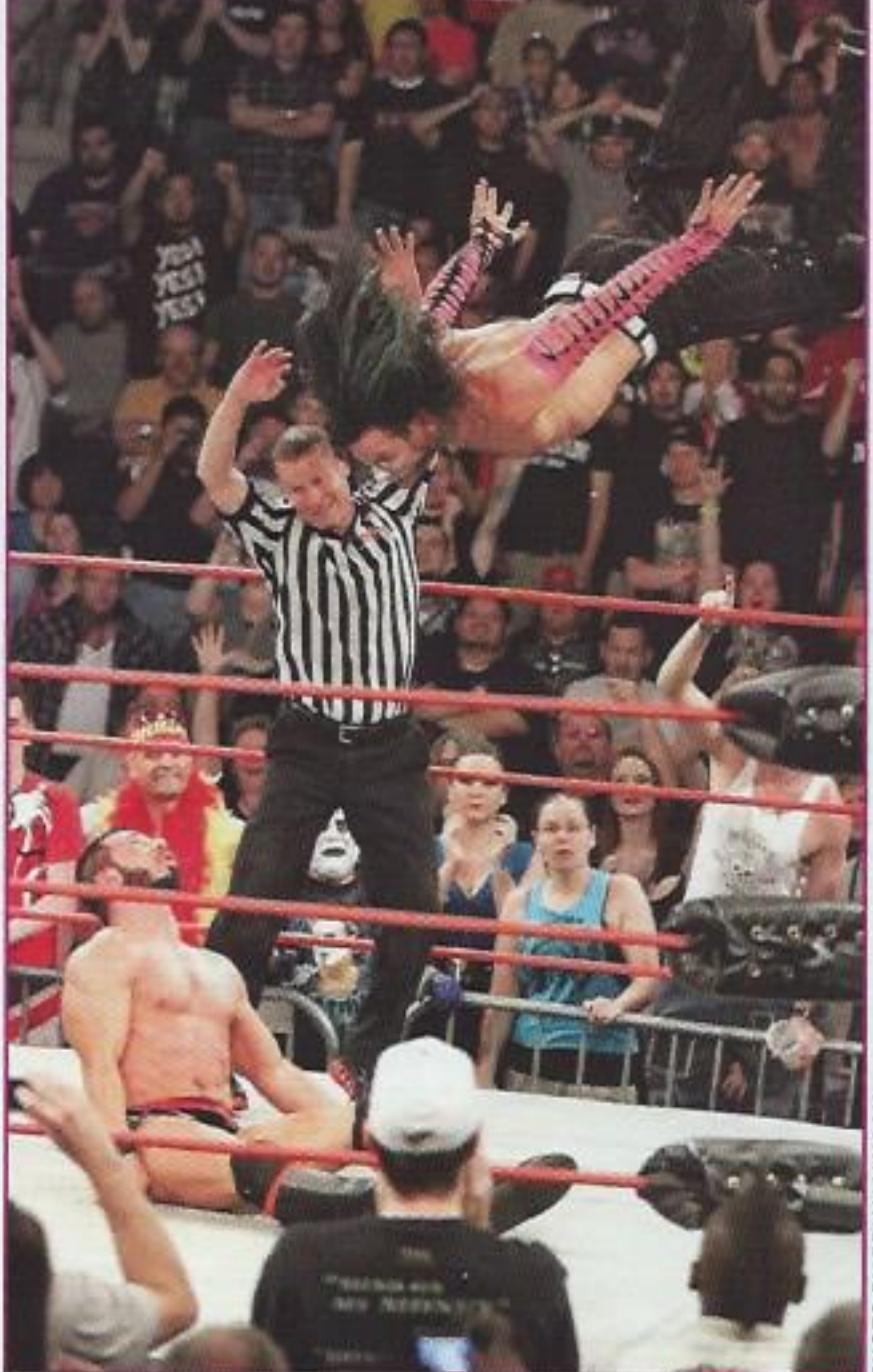


PHOTO BY BRIAN MINSON



Presenting the 2012 Turnbuckle Turkey Awards

Selected By The INSIDE WRESTLING Staff

Written By Dan Murphy

JUST LIKE A Detroit Lions loss and Midnight Madness sales, the Turnbuckle Turkeys are an annual Thanksgiving-time tradition.

In this special feature, our editorial staff singles out wrestling's 10 biggest turkeys of the past year. While we regularly name four wrestlers worthy of our scorn in our "Thumbs Up, Thumbs Down" column in *The Wrestler*, this section features wrestlers (and wrestling personalities) who earn the dubious distinction for their bad behavior and lousy decisions in real life, and not necessarily when the cameras are rolling.

For example, Kevin Nash makes our Turkey list for comments he made on Twitter, comments that came across as disrespectful to Eddie Guerrero, Chris Benoit, CM Punk, and Daniel Bryan. They also made Nash look like a self-absorbed meathead who will say anything to get his name in the news. Nash's tweet created a stir, but more than anything else, his refusal to accept the fact that a wrestler doesn't need to be 6'8" and 300 pounds to be successful makes him look like a relic from a bygone era.

One of the biggest turkeys of 2012 was Abraham Washington, who not only made an ill-advised rape joke on live television, he then went out and started a Twitter war against WWE—on his official WWE Twitter account!

We give Davey Richards the bird for the way he conducted himself at an independent card in Iowa in July. Richards became argumentative with a promoter, demanding that the promoter rearrange the card to his liking and insisting that he be paid in advance. He then left the arena (along with cohorts Tony Kozina and Kyle O'Reilly) with the cash without competing. He eventually returned the money, but only after he was publicly shamed on the Internet for his boorish and potentially criminal behavior.

Speaking of criminal, Tammy Sutch takes the proverbial cake. Sutch, whose past drug and alcohol dependency issues have been well documented, was arrested five separate times in a five-week span. She was charged with a variety of domestic abuse violations and repeatedly breaking an order of protection. One incident is a mistake; five incidents is a sign of a very serious problem. Her inability to control herself and her apparent relapse into substance abuse earns her a Turnbuckle Turkey.

In one case, we awarded the Turkey to the public face of a storyline that was offensive, silly, and ultimately unrewarding. This Turkey goes to Claire Lynch—the character at the center of a convoluted pregnancy storyline in TNA. The storyline never made much sense to begin with, and then it got even weirder when it was revealed that the actress playing the role of Lynch abruptly quit the company because she was receiving unflattering reviews on the Internet. Could you imagine Freddie Blassie, The Sheik, or Sensational Sherri ever walking out on a promotion because they were getting too much heat from the fans? What has this world come to?

Five more turkeys join Nash, A.W., Davey, Tammy, and The Actress Formerly Known As Claire Lynch. Pass the green bean casserole, and let's start carving up this year's Turkeys.

Abraham Washington

Abraham Washington had pulled a swerve and signed The Prime Time Players, abandoning Primo and Epico, who had signed with A.W. Enterprises weeks earlier. Like any manager worth his salt, A.W. needed a gimmick to help him and his team stand out, so he adopted an updated version of Jimmy Hart's megaphone—a live microphone broadcast both in the arena and on television.

For several reasons, the live mike was a mistake waiting to happen. First of all, the microphone had the opposite effect of what was intended. Instead of A.W. riling the fans with his comments, the audience remained quiet to hear what A.W. might say; it actually took attention away from the match.

In addition, a live mike at ringside was bound to pick up some catcalls and bad language from ringside fans. And it remains unclear why Washington was allowed to go unscripted on an open mike. After all, his old "talk show" was a disaster, and he never demonstrated the verbal chops to prove he could handle this opportunity.

In any case, after a few weeks of doing little more than cheerleading at ringside, A.W. realized he needed to get a little more edgy. While Titus O'Neil was manhandling an opponent, Washington made an off-the-cuff joke that would cost him his WWE career: "He's like Kobe Bryant in a hotel in Colorado. He's unstoppable!" The comment was a reference to a 2003 rape allegation against the Los Angeles Lakers star, which is in poor taste in any setting, and particularly out of place in the PG-rated WWE Universe.

Washington was scolded backstage, and WWE issued an immediate apology. A.W. took to Twitter later that night, apologizing for the comment and saying there was "no malicious intent" behind the remark.

That's where it should have ended. A.W. made a mistake on an open mike. It happens. But instead of keeping a low profile and taking his medicine, Washington went back to Twitter and proceeded to make an ass out of himself.

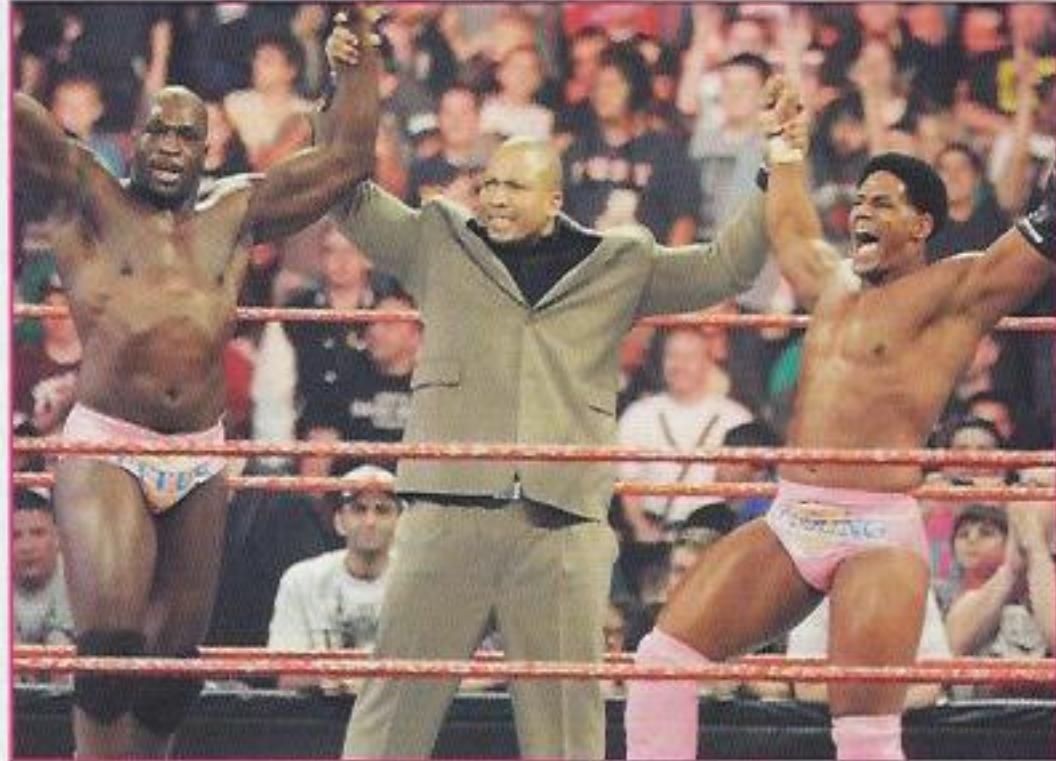
As A.W.'s Kobe joke was making the rounds on TMZ and ESPN, Washington tweeted that he wanted everyone to vote for Linda McMahon. Maybe he thought he was currying favor with the boss, but it wasn't the kind of endorsement Linda was seeking.

When he was reprimanded for that tweet, A.W. opened the floodgates, spouting off a series of anti-WWE tweets—all made from his WWE-sanctioned account. Even after being fired, he continued to rip the company.

"If I smoked crack or did steroids, I'd get suspended, but I made a joke and tweeted support for Linda and I get fired," he wrote. "You say one Kobe Bryant rape joke and you get fired. Isn't Mike Tyson a convicted rapist? Yet he is in the HOF. Hypocrisy."

He also ripped on Randy Orton for comments he made about Kelly Kelly, Vince McMahon for his treatment of Jim Ross, and John Cena before WWE finally pulled the plug on his Twitter account.

Compare Washington's behavior to the behavior of Finlay when he was suspended for authorizing The Miz to interrupt the National Anthem. Finlay took the rap, never complained, and was re-hired when the controversy died down. We don't see that happening with A.W., and he has only himself to blame.



A.W. is not geared for Prime Time

PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO



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Tammy Syltch

We don't know the reasons behind the incidents, or the personal dynamic between Syltch and Darling, but we do know that it's unhealthy and that Syltch needs help. Hopefully, another stint of rehab, courtesy of WWE, will finally turn her life around for good. We're worried about her.



he Undertaker's WrestleMania streak. Goldberg's undefeated streak. Bruno Sammartino's 2,803-day reign as WWWF champion. These are pro wrestling streaks that may never be broken.

Five arrests in five weeks. Unfortunately, that's another one for the record books.

That dubious distinction belongs to Tammy Syltch, who found herself in trouble with the police on five separate occasions in September and October.

We don't mean to pile on. It's obvious that Syltch's much-publicized battles with addiction have returned, which is a shame because the former Sunny looked healthy and happy in recent months. She had been dating Northeast independent wrestler Damien Darling, and had been keeping her legion of fans updated with carefree posts on social media sites. Like anyone who has followed her career through its ups and downs, we were delighted to see Tammy seemingly drug and alcohol-free.

Unfortunately, it appears that wasn't the case.

On September 11, Syltch was arrested for disorderly conduct in Branford, Connecticut, after an incident with Darling. She was released the following day on \$500 bond, but a few hours later she was arrested again on charges of disorderly conduct, violating a restraining order, and assault after another incident with her boyfriend. Again, she was released the following day on \$25,000 bond, only to go back and violate the restraining order again on September 13, resulting in her third arrest in three days.

Three weeks later, on October 8, Syltch was arrested for a fourth time after yet another incident with her boyfriend. She was charged with violating an order of protection, disorderly conduct, and criminal mischief. The next day, she was arrested for a fifth time and charged with third-degree burglary and three counts of violating an order of protection.

It's sad. There's no other way to describe it.

It wasn't long ago that Syltch was one of wrestling's most beloved and marketable stars. She was the beautiful woman who built the template for all future WWE Divas to come. She has been through WWE-sponsored rehabilitation programs three times now. But every time she makes a step forward, she collapses back into the same downward spiral of substance abuse and poor decision-making.

As a rule, we don't like to report on domestic incidents. There are two sides to every story, and a lovers' quarrel can quickly escalate into a spat that requires police involvement. Usually, there's some personal issue at the heart of these matters, and it's not our intention to dredge up personal issues as fodder for gossip columns.

But five arrests in a month's time is a big red flag. It's a cry for help. It's something no one can brush under the carpet.



Syltch looked like she had her life in order in 2009, when she was inducted into the WWE Hall of Fame

PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO



PHOTO BY FRANK KREWDA

Nash

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Kevin Nash is a big man, and he has a big, inflated ego to match. For those readers too young to remember his heyday more than a decade ago, Nash wore the WWF championship belt for about a year in the mid-1990s when he had the distinction of being one of the lowest-drawing champions in the company's history. He reinvented himself as a leader of the New World Order in the late-1990s, helping WCW overtake the WWF as the premier wrestling organization in the sport.

In August, "Big Sexy" was interviewed by the sports website grantland.com. In that interview, Nash ripped on current WWE stars CM Punk and Daniel Bryan, said the wrestling business was dead, and took credit for inventing the "Stone-Cold" Steve Austin character.

Perhaps all those years of breathing Diesel fumes have gone to his head ... Here are a few gems from our seven-foot Turkey:

On CM Punk and Daniel Bryan:

"They are not bigger than life. I bet they could both walk through airports and not be noticed unless they have a gimmick shirt on and the belt."

On Chris Benoit and Eddie Guerrero, two of the wrestlers he famously wrote off as "vanilla midgets" for being bland and unable to draw on top (a subject Nash should know well):

"When Benoit and Guerrero hugged [at the end of WrestleMania 20], that was the end of the business. Has business been the same since that WrestleMania? Has it come close to the Austin era? Has it come close to the NWO or the Hogan era?"

Apparently, Nash didn't get the memo that WrestleMania 28 (eight years after that hug) was the highest-grossing WrestleMania of all-time. Not too shabby for a business that was killed by smaller wrestlers.

On the rise of Austin:

"Isn't it amazing that I dragged the belt to the ring, had the glass break? They took everything that worked, revved it up after I told them the basic premise of the future champion [as an anti-hero], and they gave it to Steve. He took it to heights I couldn't take it to. He took what I blueprinted."

At least Nash is humble enough to give Austin partial credit for his success; that's mighty big of him.

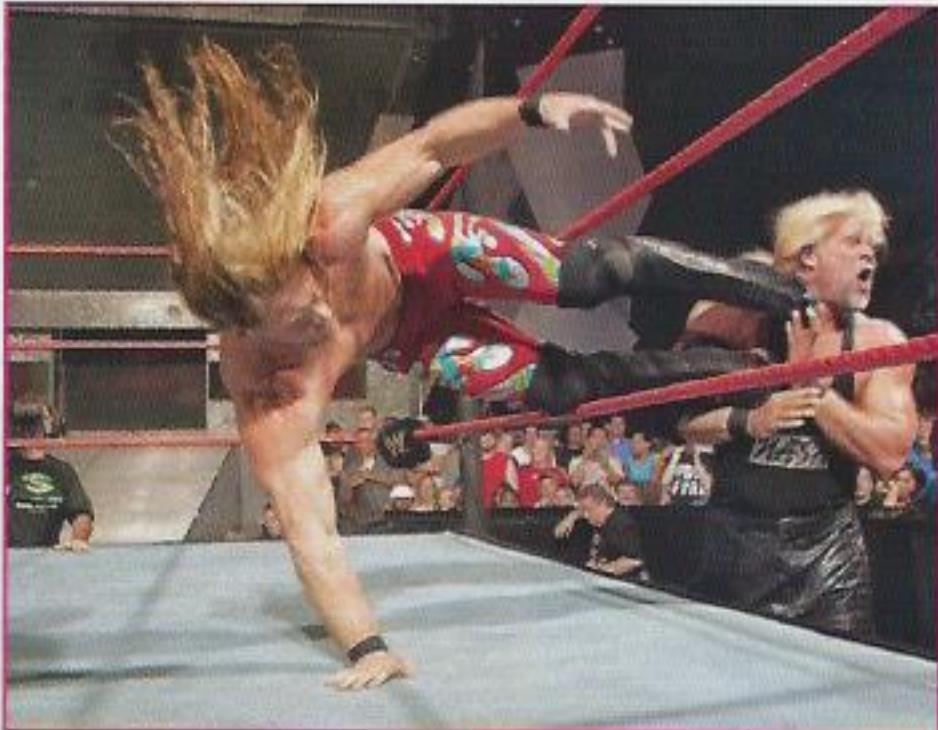
Nash isn't the first ex-wrestler to offer his own revisionist spin on history, and he's certainly not the only ex-wrestler to overinflate his own importance while burying top stars. What makes Nash stand out is that he always comes across like he's trying to politick his way into a storyline, like he's trying to create controversy to leverage himself into another high-paying wrestling gig.

When Chris Jericho called Nash out for his remarks, Nash tweeted, "Once again, the puppet master pulls the marks (sic) strings. Knew Jericho was a closet mark. First one eliminated on a (expletive) sing show ... REALLY!!"

Whose strings was Nash pulling—the reporter from Grantland? Wrestling fans? It doesn't matter. No one cares.

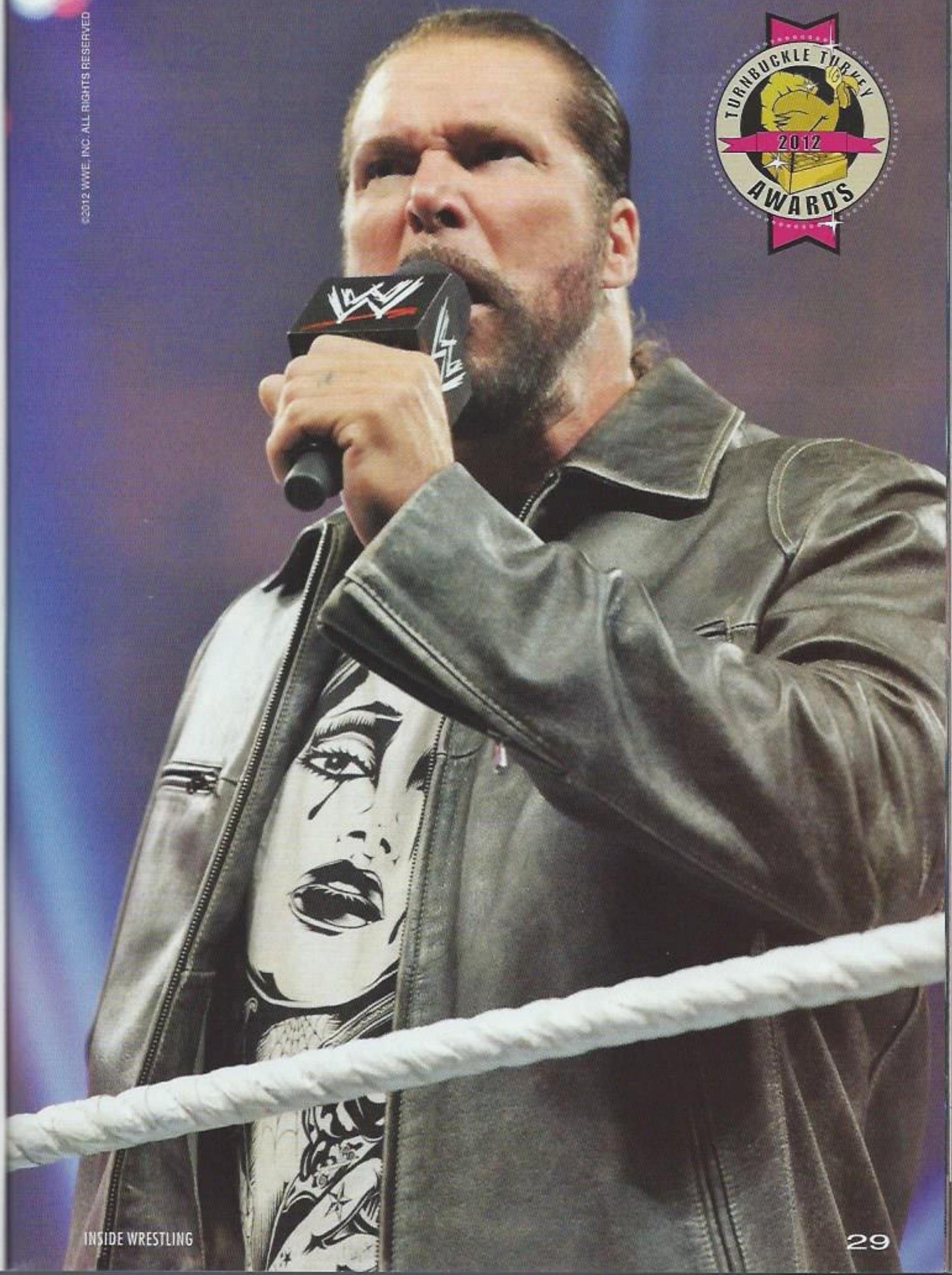
And can Nash's antics even really be compared to a puppet show? After all, even puppet shows have a plot and an audience.

Or maybe Nash is still smarting from the way Punk humiliated him and left him tongue-tied during their unforgettable verbal exchange on the August 15, 2011, edition of *Raw*.



Chris Jericho put Nash in his place nine years ago

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Kurt Angle

Back in 2003, when Kurt Angle was making noise about trying for a second Olympic gold medal, INSIDE WRESTLING ran an insightful article written by the late 1984 Olympic gold medalist Jeff Blatnick entitled "The Impossible Dream, Part 2: Can Kurt Angle Win Another Olympic Gold In 2004?"

In that article, Blatnick assessed the then-34-year-old's chances of succeeding at the upcoming Olympics, eight years after winning gold at the Atlanta Games. "What Kurt Angle could be doing is trying to generate some curiosity about Olympic wrestling," Blatnick wrote. "I have nothing against that. I think it's great, but this looks more like a publicity stunt than a legitimate comeback attempt to me."

Blatnick wrote those words nine years ago, but they rang just as true in 2012 as they did in 2003. Still, Angle told anyone who would listen that he intended to make his return to the Olympic mats at the 2012 Games, a full 16 years after he had last wrestled a freestyle match. These Olympic dreams came after a series of go-nowhere claims he had made in recent years regarding competing in MMA. And, just like all those MMA promises, his Olympic bid fizzled out.

In April, Angle, then 43, officially admitted defeat, claiming that hamstring and knee injuries would prevent him from competing at the Olympic Trials. We suspect that 16 years of pro wrestling bumps, a twice-broken neck, and battles with painkillers also had quite a bit to do with that decision.

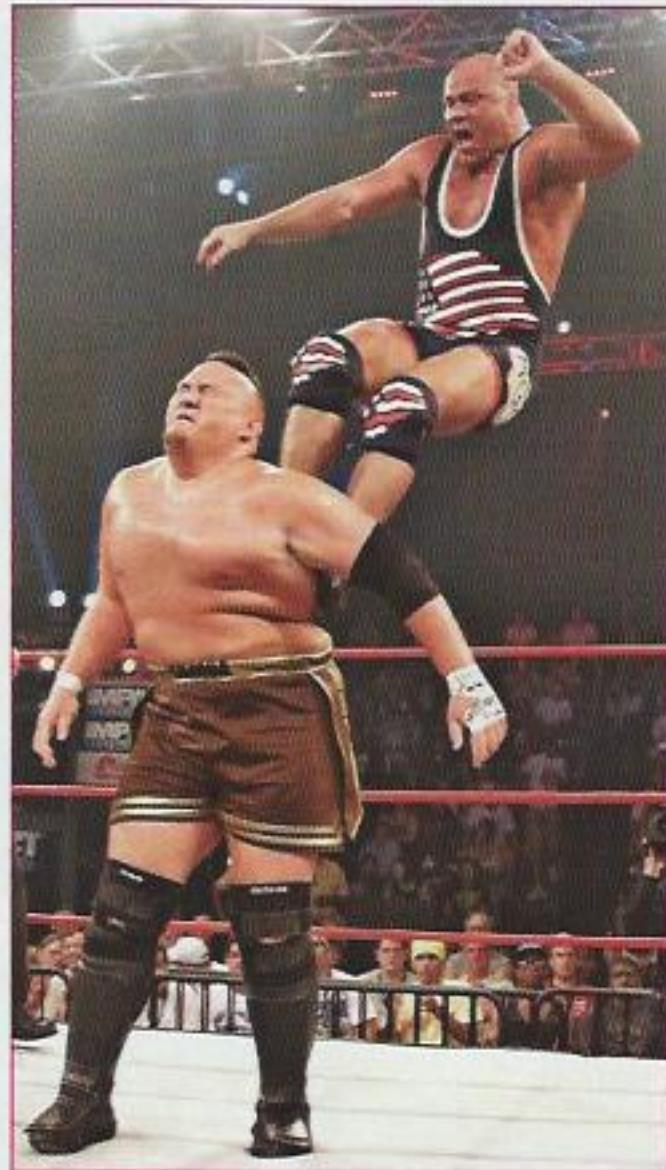
To Angle's credit, he actually poked fun at himself, producing a video on "Funny Or Die" that saw him trying out for other Olympic sports, such as fencing, beach volleyball, ping pong, and race walking. Admittedly, the video was hysterical, but we still can't comprehend why being an elite professional wrestler isn't good enough for Angle.

Angle is one of the finest performers of his generation. He is an 11-time world champion. He was named Wrestler of the Year by PWI readers in 2003, won Match of the Year honors (twice), and has won just about every championship there is to win in both WWE and TNA. He was elected to the *Wrestling Observer* Hall of Fame in his first year of eligibility. Angle has done it all ... but it still isn't good enough. Instead, he has to keep making grandiose claims about going into mixed martial arts or Olympic competition.

Bret Hart didn't need to jump to UFC to prove himself. Shawn Michaels never had to try out for a freestyle wrestling team. They were secure in the legacies they created inside the wrestling ring. Angle actually *diminishes* his legacy every time he makes one of these foolhardy boasts he can't back up. He allows himself to become a punchline—the aging wrestler who keeps striking out with every new endeavor. Instead of drawing attention to his accomplishments, Angle seems intent to draw attention to his failures and false promises.

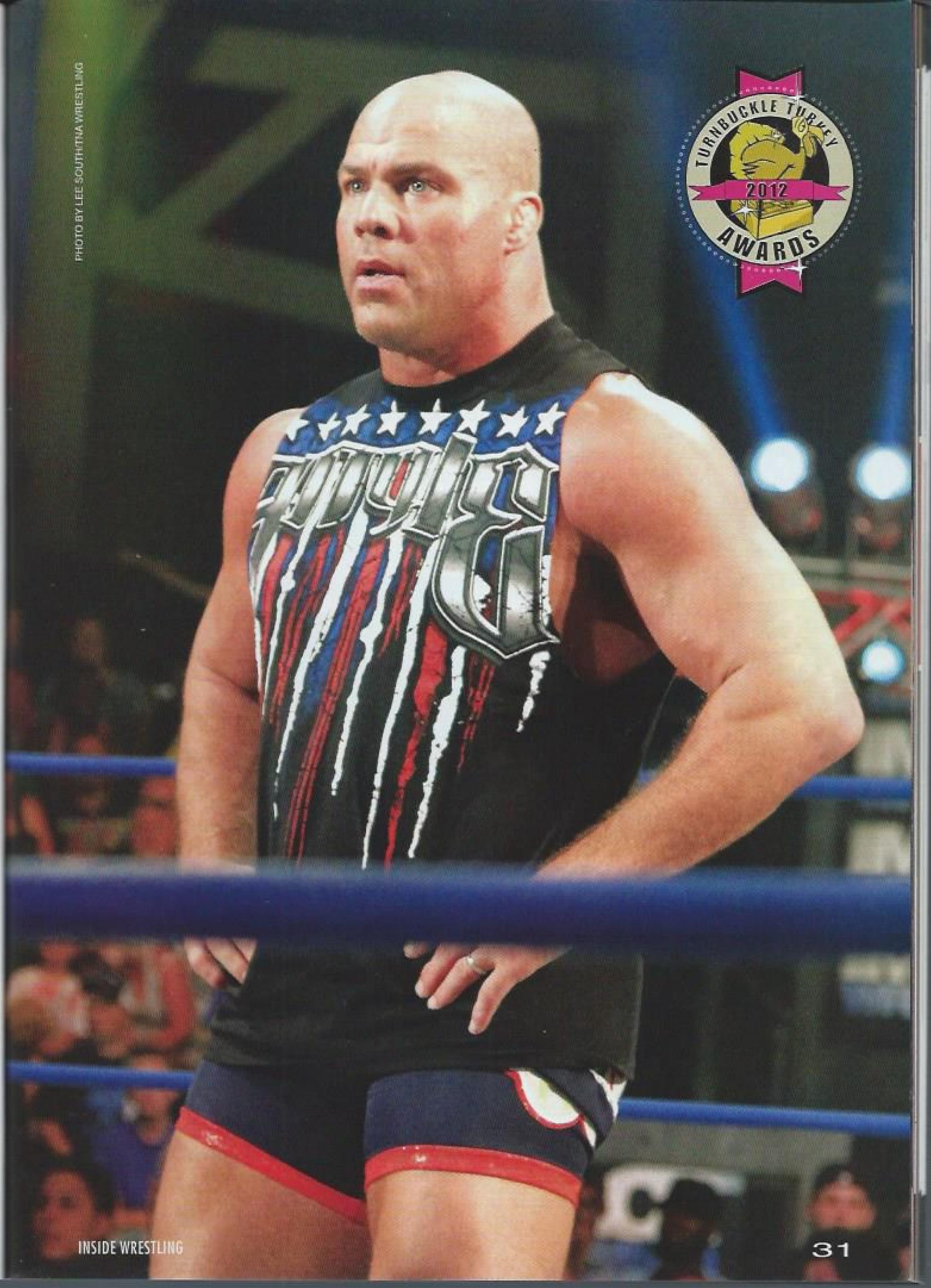
We understand that Angle didn't dream of becoming a pro wrestler when he was a kid. He was recruited into the business because he won the gold medal in 1996, and he proved to be a natural. If pro wrestling isn't stoking his competitive fires anymore, he should leave wrestling and dedicate himself to MMA, like Batista, Brock Lesnar, and Bobby Lashley did. He can't continue wrestling and dive into a new sport at the same time.

Kurt: Let the Olympic dream go. Don't make us break out the Blatnick story again in 2016.



Why isn't this enough for Kurt?

PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/TNA WRESTLING



Buff Bagwell

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On April 23, former WCW star Marcus "Buff" Bagwell was involved in a serious car accident in which he suffered a broken jaw and fractures in his face and neck. According to a report on TMZ, citing a police account, Bagwell was driving in a Jeep near Atlanta and called his wife to tell her he was about to have a seizure. A short time later, Bagwell apparently lost control of his vehicle and spun over a raised median, flipping his vehicle. He was rushed to an Atlanta-area hospital, where he was placed in intensive care.

It's unclear why Bagwell was apparently able to call his wife and tell her that he felt a seizure coming on but wasn't able to pull over before losing control of his vehicle. Perhaps traffic conditions prevented him from stopping, though if he had time to call his wife, it seems likely he should have had time to put on his hazard lights and bring the vehicle to a stop on the shoulder.

In the hospital, Bagwell required breathing and feeding tubes. He had four steel plates inserted into his face and had his jaw wired shut until it healed. He was discharged from the hospital on May 31, more than a month after the accident.

Less than two months later, Bagwell was arrested and charged with reckless driving. He was taken into custody by the Cherokee County Sheriff's Department and was subsequently released on bond.

So, less than 90 days after flipping his vehicle in a life-threatening accident, Bagwell apparently was driving so erratically that he was taken into police custody. That's not a speeding ticket or a slap on the wrist for running a red light; that's a police officer deciding that Bagwell's driving was so dangerous that he had to be taken off the road.

Given the severity of his injuries—and the fact that he inadvertently placed other motorists in danger when he lost control of his vehicle—one would think that Bagwell would be driving with care and obeying the rules of the road.

Bagwell had our sympathy after the initial accident, but the reckless driving arrest shows that he hasn't learned from past mistakes. He was arrested for DUI in 2006, though alcohol or drugs were not named as factors in his recent incidents.

In any case, Bagwell has repeatedly shown his unwillingness—or inability—to operate a motor vehicle in a safe manner. He has put himself in danger, and had jeopardized the safety of other motorists. Even a lengthy hospital stay wasn't enough to convince him to obey traffic laws.

It's time for the 42-year-old to learn from his mistakes. His next traffic accident could have fatal consequences. Perhaps his license should be suspended or revoked. Maybe he should hire a professional driver or start taking taxi cabs or public transportation. When it comes to defensive driving, Buff is a true turkey.



We'd like to see Bagwell be able to share time with fans for many years to come

PHOTO BY SCOTT FINKELSTEIN



PHOTO BY SCOTT FINKELSTEIN

Kenny King

KIt's tough to fault someone for making a move to advance his career, but there's a right way to leave a job and a wrong way to leave a job. Kenny King opted for the wrong way, and his decision left his former employer—and his tag team partner—in the lurch.

On June 24, King and Rhett Titus defeated Shelton Benjamin and Charlie Haas for the Ring of Honor tag team title. It was a sweet victory for The All-Night Express, who had graduated to the top of the tag team ranks after a bloody and hard-fought feud with The Briscoe Brothers in 2011. King and Titus seemed set to start a new chapter in their careers and solidify their claim of being one of wrestling's top young tandems.

As it turned out, King's contract with ROH expired the same day he won the tag team title. While we're not privy to the contract negotiations between both sides, we have to assume that ROH was under the impression that King was planning on sticking around. It seems bizarre that he would be in a match for the tag title on his last night with the company. According to reports, King and ROH had a "handshake agreement," where ROH was willing to allow King to test the waters and talk to other promotions on the condition that King gave Ring of Honor proper notice if he decided to sign with a different promotion.

If those reports are true, ROH went out of its way to offer King a fair deal. Not many professional sports teams—or pro wrestling promotions—give their talent an opportunity to negotiate with competitors while holding a roster spot open if they decide to remain. ROH demonstrated loyalty and respect.

King, however, did not. He traveled to Orlando to meet with TNA executives. He was offered a match that same night, a qualifier for the X division tournament that would culminate at Destination X. While ROH had given him their blessing to meet with TNA, he had agreed not to wrestle for any other promotion. King reneged on his verbal agreement and wrestled against Lars Only in a televised match, effectively slapping Ring of Honor in the face.

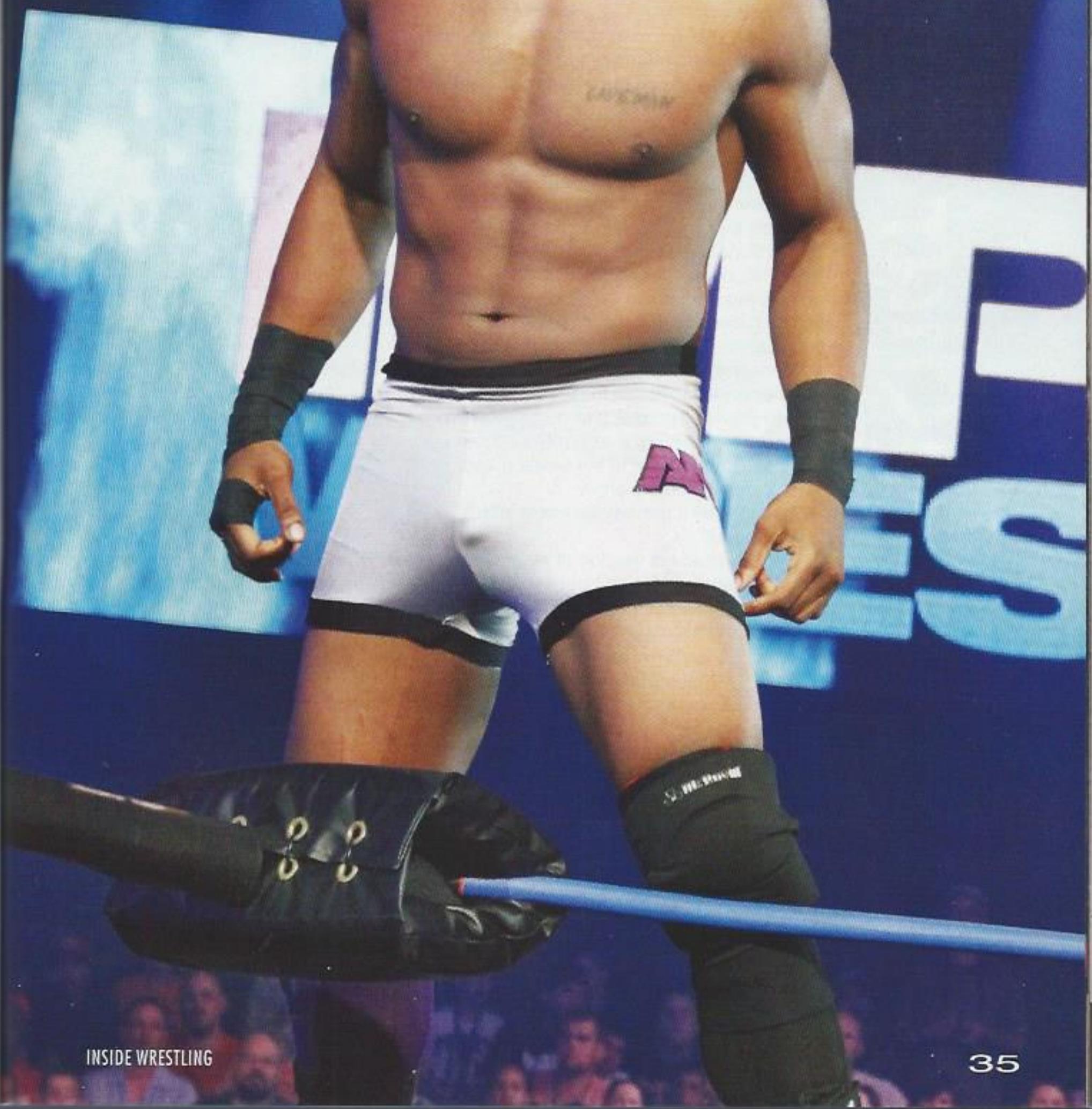
Some might say that King was in a tight spot. He had an opportunity to join TNA and become part of the X division just as the company was ramping up toward its big X division-themed PPV. But there's something to be said for honor, and King demonstrated a severe lack of it by jumping to TNA and leaving ROH without one of its tag team champions.

King could have informed TNA of his agreement with ROH and said that he wanted to repay Ring of Honor for its professional courtesy by being professional in return. He could have declined that match and negotiated a future start date. Then he could have returned to ROH, finished up his obligations there, and started with TNA afterward. That's the correct protocol in these situations. Instead, he jumped ship. He turned his back on his partner. And he went from being a champion to being a small fish in TNA's overcrowded X division fishbowl.



A joyous moment with Rhett Titus, 10 days before his TNA debut

PHOTO BY SCOTT FINKELSTEIN



Davey Richards

Davey Richards "The American Wolf" is a pretty cool nickname ... but maybe "The American Bully" would be more accurate.

The former Ring of Honor champion has built a strong following for his hard-nosed, strong-style ring work and his take-no-nonsense demeanor. Those are traits that have helped him in the ring, but they're not necessarily the best of traits when conducting business.

In May, Richards angered New Japan Pro Wrestling matchmakers when he begged off an event in Fukuoka, Japan. Richards said he had been hurt in a car accident, but the no-show left a sour taste in the mouths of NJPW officials, who stripped Davey and Rocky Romero of the IWGP tag team title.

Right around the same time, Richards vanished from ROH for several weeks after ripping on the company in an interview with highspots.com. The comments further soured Richards' reputation with fans and his peers.

But the biggest blunder in his boneheaded trifecta was the way he handled himself backstage at an Adrenaline Pro Wrestling event in Iowa. Richards was traveling with his "Team Ambition" partners Tony Kozina and Kyle O'Reilly. The trio was scheduled to compete in different events on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, and also run a training seminar on Saturday afternoon.

Friday night passed without incident, but things started turning sour the next day. According to reports from several individuals involved over the weekend (including wrestler Jaysin Strife and other fans and wrestlers who posted anonymously online), Richards and his crew were badmouthing the wrestlers on the card Saturday and creating a division in the lockerroom. When Kozina faced a local teenaged competitor, he allegedly took liberties with the youngster in the ring, beating and choking him in an attempt to "teach him respect."

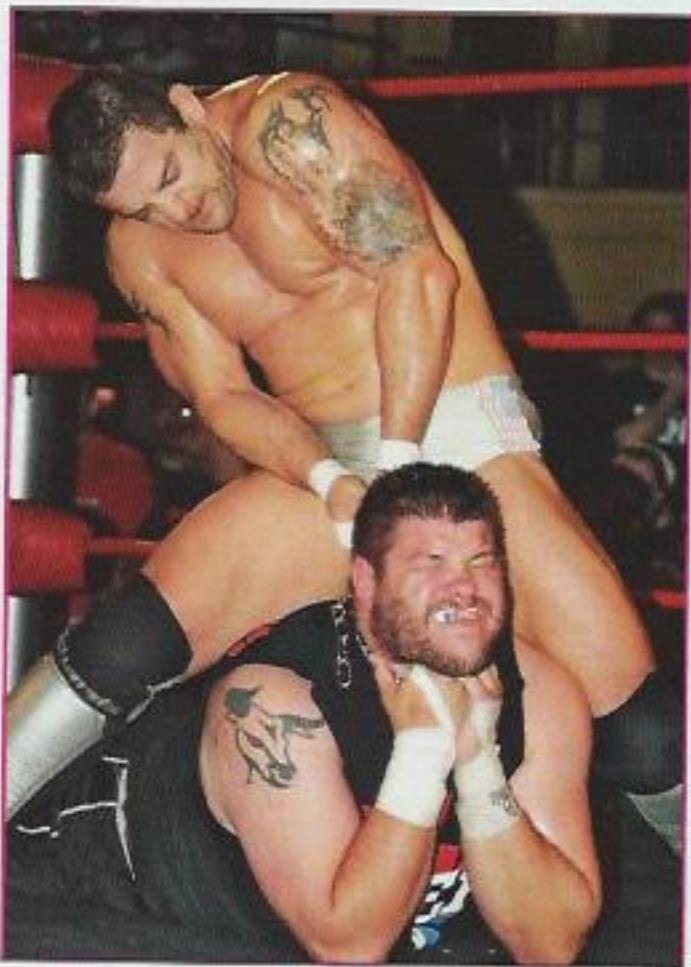
On Sunday, Richards allegedly sent a series of text messages to the promoter, Jeremy Hall, demanding that the card be changed and that Team Ambition be booked in one six-man tag match, as opposed to individual matches that had previously been negotiated, claiming that Kozina and O'Reilly were injured. Since this was a change from the matches that had been previously agreed upon, Hall attempted to renegotiate pay.

Team Ambition arrived at the building late (right before the main event) and Richards demanded to speak to Hall outside. According to witnesses, Richards threatened the 140-pound promoter and demanded payment. After agreeing on a \$350 payout, Richards and his crew apparently took the money, running out of the building and never appearing on the show.

How's that for a guy whose whole shtick is about "honor"?

O'Reilly posted his version of events on his blog, defending Kozina, and explaining that they felt "insulted and disrespected" by Hall. As for the so-called threats, O'Reilly admitted, "[Davey's words] can come off as extremely intimidating and were obviously misconstrued as threats. We DO NOT threaten people."

Richards eventually paid back the \$350 in full and posted his own version of the story online. Like O'Reilly's, his version boils down to feeling disrespected. *Boo-hoo!* Team Ambition agreed to a booking, tried to call an audible, intimidated a promoter, and ran off with his money. Oh, and Kozina roughed up a kid. It doesn't seem like they did much to earn that respect, does it? Richards has some work to do to repair his image.



Richards is doing his best to ruin the image he created

PHOTO BY SCOTT FINKELSTEIN



Claire Lynch

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When it comes to the Claire Lynch storyline, there's more than enough turkey to go around. Christopher Daniels, Kazarian, and the TNA Creative team can all take "credit" for their role in arguably the most ill-conceived (pun fully intended) angle of 2012.

The shenanigans started in May when Daniels and Kazarian accused AJ Styles of having an affair with TNA President Dixie Carter, producing grainy photographs of the two embracing. Daniels and Kazarian continued to release "proof" of the affair, including more pictures and seemingly incriminating audio. After several weeks of allegations, Styles and Carter came clean. They weren't having an affair, but they were keeping a secret. They were quietly helping a woman named Claire Lynch overcome drug addiction, and they didn't want Claire's issues to become fodder for the public.

That's when the plot thickened.

Lynch announced she was pregnant with Styles' baby and produced a series of the two of them in bed together (Styles was asleep). Styles claimed he didn't remember the alleged affair and that, if it was true, he must have been drugged.

The only thing tackier than a pregnancy storyline in wrestling is a pregnancy storyline with overtones of date rape.

Over the next several weeks, Lynch stalked Styles from ringside, demanding he "do the right thing" and acknowledge he was the father of the baby. She became a screaming, obsessed harpy, straight out of *Fatal Attraction*. Daniels and Kazarian insulted Styles, portraying him as a love 'em-and-leave-'em deadbeat.

Clearly, the right move for any man accused of fathering a child would be for both parties to sit down and discuss the situation, to consult with legal counsel, and arrange a paternity test. Not in TNA! Instead, Styles had to beat Daniels in a singles match to win the right for a paternity test. (Perhaps Styles should have employed Joseph Park as his legal counsel.)

Styles won the match, and it was announced that Claire was never pregnant at all. The whole thing was a plot designed by Daniels and Kazarian in an attempt to humiliate Styles. Claire was an actress hired to play the part.

In fact, the actress who portrayed Claire Lynch, Julia Reilly, actually quit TNA before the storyline had run its course, claiming that wrestling fans had found her real name and were attacking her online with disparaging comments about her looks and acting abilities—comments no aspiring actress wants floating around in cyberspace. Apparently, she didn't realize that her acting on a national television show could draw criticism, or that playing a villain might lead to people making negative comments about the character she portrayed.

Not that we condone boorish behavior online, but an actor has to be thick-skinned enough to accept some criticism before walking out on a role.

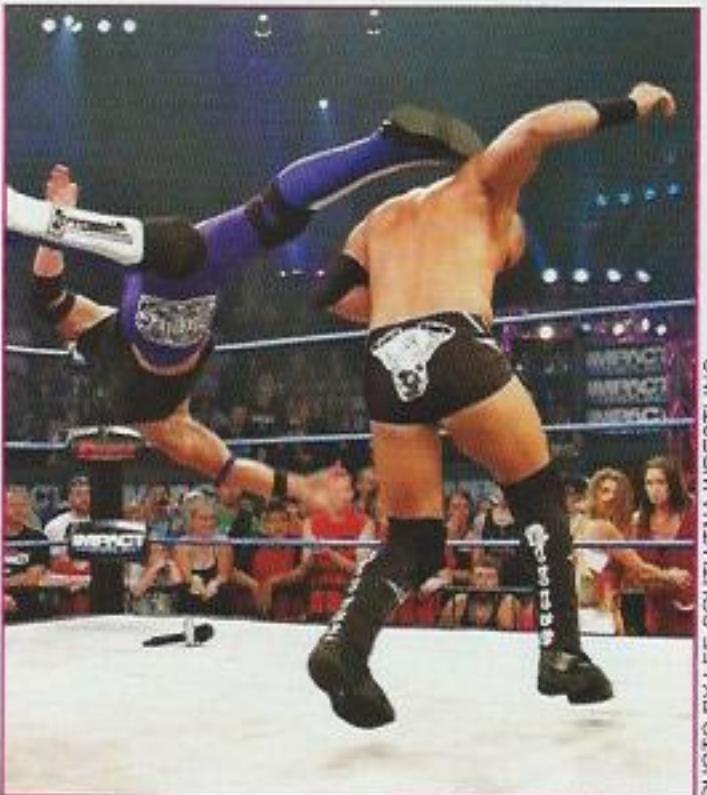
So the whole thing was a ruse, and "Claire Lynch" disappeared, but we were left with several unanswered questions.

What did Daniels and Kazarian have to gain from this whole farce? Even with the distraction, Styles managed to beat Daniels on a consistent basis.

When did this actress convince Carter and Styles that she was a drug addict? Years ago?

Did someone drug Styles? Where were the incriminating "post-coital" photos taken?

Most importantly, did someone on the TNA Creative team actually think this whole convoluted mess would be entertaining?



Claire and Dixie watch the men do battle from ringside

PHOTO BY LEE SOUTHTNA WRESTLING

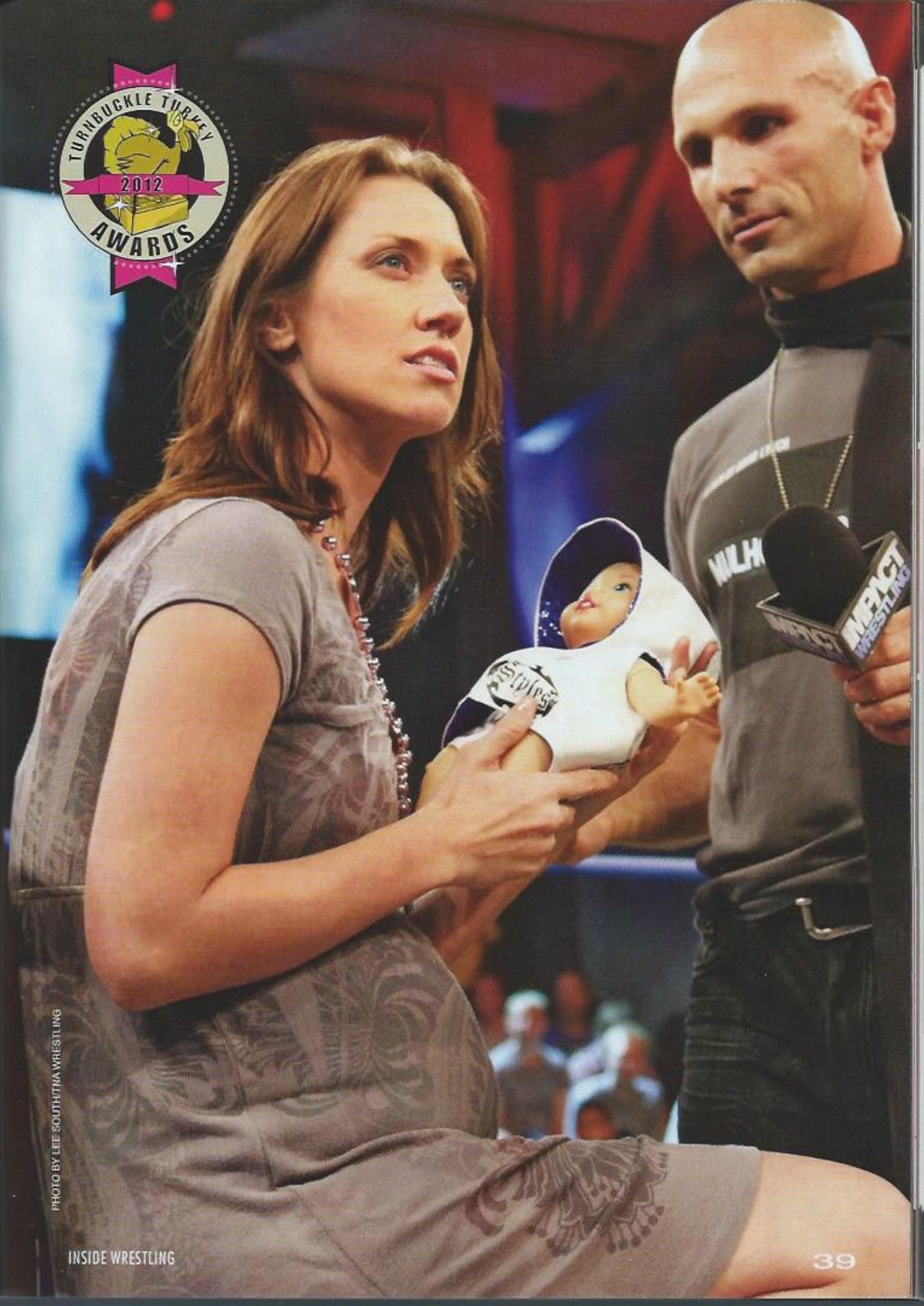


PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/TNA WRESTLING

INSIDE WRESTLING

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Ring of Honor

RInternet pay-per-view figured to be a major revenue source for Ring of Honor, a promotion that survived for years based largely on DVD sales and a strong web community. Instead, after five iPPV events, ROH has not only failed to make money, it has frustrated its core fan base and left people speculating about the long-term future of the company.

Starting with the two-part Showdown in the Sun iPPV event in March, Ring of Honor has been plagued with technical issues. These failures have left ROH officials apologizing and scrambling to win back the confidence of viewers, but as recently as the September Death Before Dishonor X event, ROH was still experiencing outages and system crashes, resulting in dissatisfied customers and stalled momentum for the company.

At Showdown in the Sun, the audio was out of sync with the video, and a brown-out in the building delayed the event by more than half an hour. Those problems caused ROH to drop GoFightLive as its iPPV provider and attempt to produce the events on its own.

ROH experienced another PPV catastrophe with Border Wars in May, with many viewers receiving error messages when they attempted to log in to the event.

The company offered its next event, Best in the World 2012, free to all Border Wars customers. But the gremlins returned at Death Before Dishonor, as many customers were unable to access the broadcast, and many of those who could get through were only able to see a partial card.

Some bugs and mistakes are bound to occur when a wrestling promotion begins offering live pay-per-view events, either through a standard pay cable system or online; that happened to WWE, WCW, and ECW. But where ROH fails, and where it earns its Turnbuckle Turkey, lies in its response to those issues.

After Border Wars, ROH COO Joe Koff (pictured, opposite page) held a conference call with media members in which he apologized for the transmission difficulties. He sounded very sincere when he said, "All I can say is I'm sorry. I don't want anyone turned away from this. I think people want to forgive, as long as there's an effort to correct a problem and communicate it."

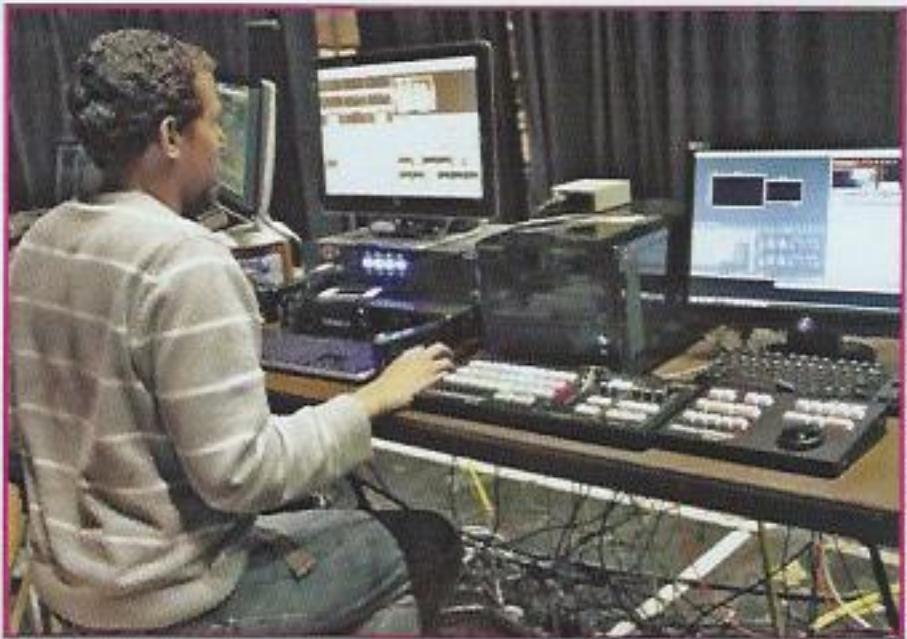
After Death Before Dishonor, however, ROH created a public relations nightmare by publishing an editorial on its website that glossed over any difficulties, claiming there were "some issues at the start of the broadcast, [but] everything came together quickly, which ended in an awesome night of ROH wrestling action."

Instead of being upfront, acknowledging the difficulties experienced by iPPV customers (including lost feeds, system lock-ups, and "stream unavailable" error messages), ROH has downplayed the technical issues and blamed "negative columnists" for "stirring the pot."

It took ROH two days to even acknowledge the technical issues concerning Death Before Dishonor, as company officials were initially unaware of the difficulties. ROH then announced that any dissatisfied DBD customers had 24 hours to apply for a full refund.

It was a pretty lousy *mea culpa* that was given grudgingly, and only after Internet forums and websites lit up with complaints from frustrated ROH fans.

To its credit, ROH's iPPV presentation of Glory By Honor 11 in October came off without a hitch. So maybe the technical issues are a thing of the past. For the sake of the promotion and its fans, we certainly hope so. But we also hope ROH internally addressed whoever was responsible for the manner in which it handled the public outcry after Death Before Dishonor. Technical glitches are forgivable; this was not.



They seem to know what they're doing at the venue

PHOTO BY SCOTT FINKELSTEIN



PHOTO BY SCOTT FINKELSTEIN

INSIDE WRESTLING

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Cameron

Clay and The Funkadactyls appeal to kids; they regularly bring small children into the ring to dance with them after matches. Cameron is obligated to be a role model. Driving under the influence is always a bad decision, with potentially deadly consequences. Failing to take responsibility for that decision is even worse.

C

everybody makes mistakes.

Making a mistake is one thing; compounding that mistake by offering a bribe to a police officer and then pretending the incident never happened is something completely different.

On the morning of August 24, WWE performer Cameron (real name Ariane Andrew) was arrested in Tampa Bay, Florida, and charged with driving under the influence. According to reports, she registered a .20 blood alcohol content, more than twice the legal limit. She admitted to police she had been drinking martinis earlier in the evening.

Cameron isn't the first WWE performer to get busted on a DUI charge. The reason the Funkadactyl is a Turkey is because of her behavior after the arrest.

Cameron never informed WWE about the incident. She was with WWE on a tour of China when the story broke on TMZ nearly a week later, leaving the company with egg on its face and little option but to suspend her for 15 days. "Ariane did not alert us to this matter, we are investigating and will take appropriate action," an unnamed WWE representative told TMZ.

To make matters worse, according to TMZ, Cameron had offered police officers \$10,000 to look the other way and drop the charges. If that's true, she's lucky she didn't get charged with attempted bribery. According to reports, she also listed her occupation as a "sales associate" with Wells Fargo. We wonder how many Wells Fargo sales associates are in the financial position to be going around offering \$10,000 bribes ... and is Wells Fargo hiring?

The bottom line is that Cameron panicked. She didn't want to get arrested and she didn't want to lose her job with WWE. Those are justifiable fears and concerns. But lying to police officers (allegedly), offering a bribe (again, allegedly), and failing to inform her employer when she knows that doing so is proper company protocol, is not justifiable. Cameron's decision-making is especially poor when you consider that WWE has been lenient with other performers who have been charged with the same offense.

Cameron, who would later plead not guilty, behaved like a child who breaks a window and then runs away and hides. She failed to take responsibility for her actions. In doing so, she came off badly and put her employer in an awkward situation.

While we don't condone providing incorrect information to a police officer or offering cash to avoid charges, we can understand that she was in a distressed state of mind at the time of the incident. Failing to report the incident to her employer for a period of four days is unacceptable.

Cameron's actions also hurt her partners, Brodus Clay and Naomi. Because Cameron was suspended, the popular Clay was barely used on television. As part of a three-person team, her partners were indirectly punished for her actions.



PHOTO BY WAYNE McCARTY

Cameron has to behave like the role model she is

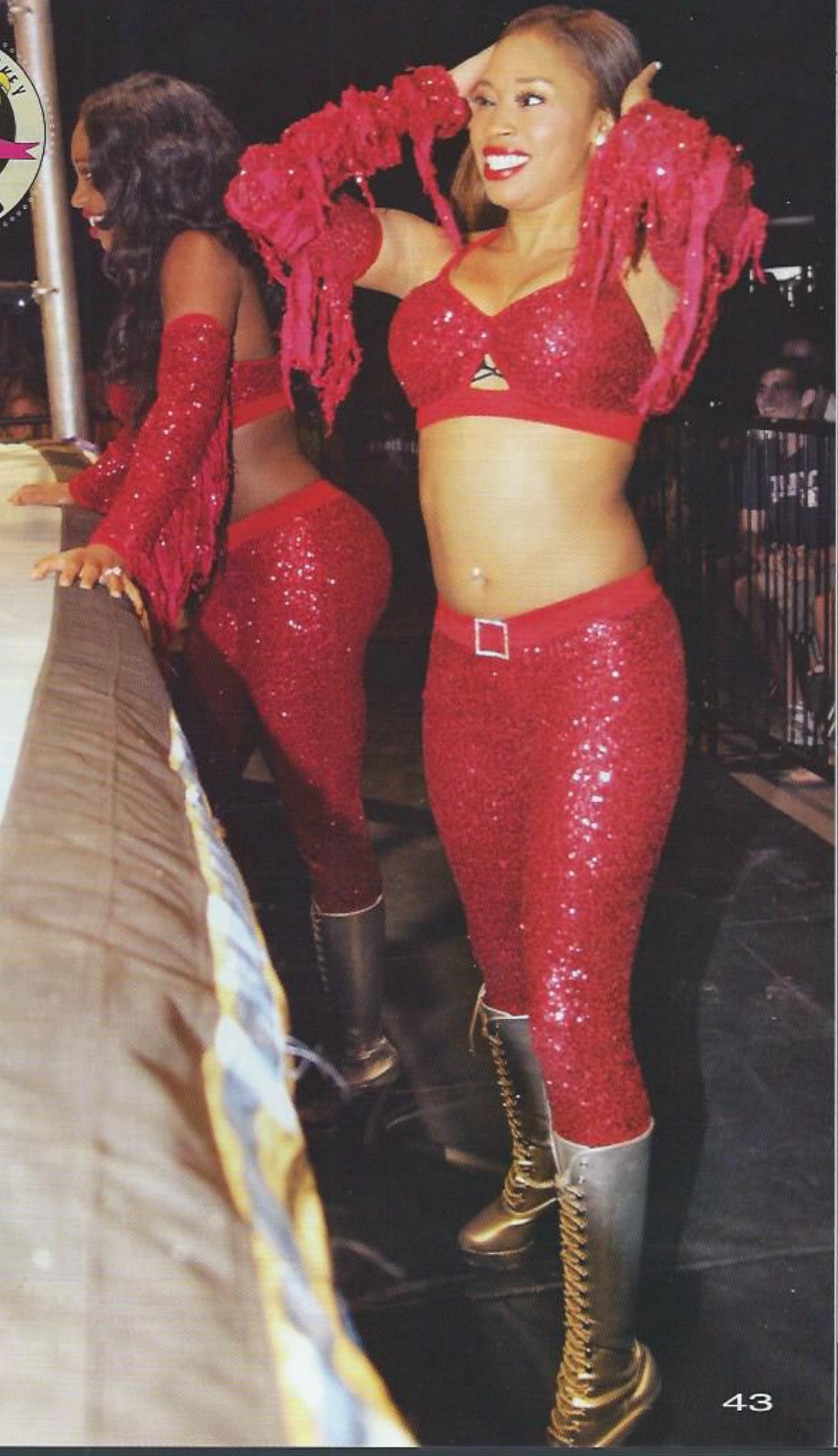


PHOTO BY WAYNE McCARTY

INSIDE WRESTLING

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editors' roundtable

"If you include *NXT* and *Superstars*, that's 8½ hours, which is just an overwhelming amount of programming to expect viewers to watch.

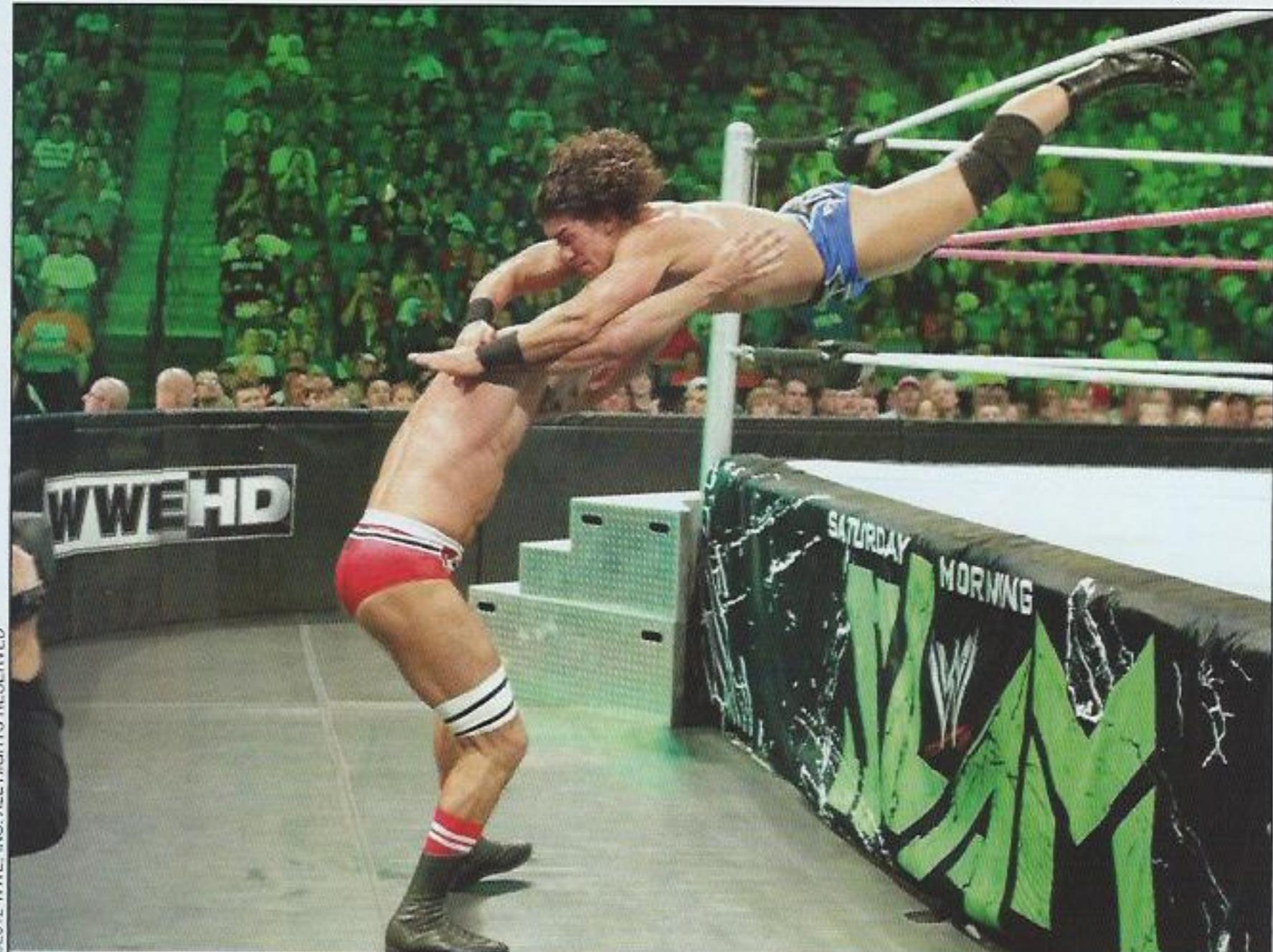
—Dave Lenker

Is WWE running the risk of overexposure, or is the additional programming beneficial in building new stars?

AS YOUR DVR might attest, there is more first-run WWE content on television and available online than ever before. In July, WWE extended the length of its flagship *Raw* show from two to three hours. One month later, the company introduced *Saturday Morning Slam*, a 30-minute show on the CW Network show aimed at the children's market. In October, WWE premiered *WWE Main Event*, a 60-minute show airing on Ion Television.

In addition to the new 2½ hours of television content, WWE entered into an agreement with Internet content provider Hulu to stream all of its television shows and some of its web content (such as the *WWE NXT* and *WWE Superstars* programs).

On top of that, WWE has also been producing original content for social media sites, including several YouTube series and short promos and vignettes produced with the company's partner service, Tout.



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Derrick Bateman dives through the ropes at U.S. champion Antonio Cesaro in a match that was viewed largely by kids on *Saturday Morning Slam*. As talented as Bateman is, he's not likely to be in a featured bout on *Raw* or *Smackdown*.

The much-anticipated WWE Network has been delayed, but is still expected to launch in 2013, in some form yet to be identified. That promises even more sports entertainment to be produced in the coming year.

Critics contend that WWE is running the risk of over-exposing its product and eroding its current fan base. Proponents say the increased exposure can help wrestling attract new fans and gives opportunities to new talent that may have struggled for face time on *Raw* and *Smackdown*.

To discuss the pros and cons of this unprecedented increase in exposure, Publisher Stu Saks, Senior Writers Dave Lenker and Dan Murphy, and Contributing Writer Brady Hicks gathered for a roundtable discussion.

STU SAKS: Let me start with a basic question that really gets to the heart of the matter: As wrestling fans—and not necessarily as wrestling writers—do you enjoy the increase in WWE programming available on TV and online? Murph?

DAN MURPHY: Not at all. To be honest, just watching three hours of *Raw* feels like a chore more often than not. Everything else winds up on the DVR, where I can scan my way through it.

BRADY HICKS: I can see where Dan's coming from, but I think the other shows bring something new to the table. Daniel Bryan and Tyson Kidd recently had a very enjoyable match on *Saturday Morning Slam*, which isn't something you'd be likely to see on *Raw*. And the Intercontinental title match between Kofi

Kingston and The Miz was given main-event status on *Main Event*, whereas it would probably be treated as filler on *Raw*.

DAVE LENKER: I get what you're saying, Brady, but who has time to watch 6½ hours of WWE every week?

MURPHY: Don't forget *NXT* and *Superstars*.

LENKER: Right, if you include *NXT* and *Superstars*, that's 8½ hours, which is just an overwhelming amount of programming to expect viewers to watch.

HICKS: I think you guys are missing a crucial point. I don't think all these shows are geared for all viewers. *Saturday Morning Slam* is for kids. *Main Event*, *Superstars*,



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After a breakout year in 2011, Alex Riley has become something of a forgotten man in WWE. If you have a computer—and the time—you may catch him on *Superstars*.

"I think these shows allow the WWE spotlight to shine on more wrestlers. It gives people like Tyson Kidd and Seth Rollins a chance to be showcased, and that can help WWE build new stars."

—Brady Hicks

and *NXT* feature a lot of up-and-coming talent, as opposed to established names.

SAKS: Brady has a point. Part of the reason for the different approaches and styles of each program has to be to attract different demographics and build the fan base. Will it work?

LENKER: The only way I see that strategy working is if each show begins airing exclusive "must-see" content. Right now, I can

watch *Raw* or *Smackdown* and get updates on anything important that happens on any program. If no update is given, then it must not be that important, right?

MURPHY: I think the idea of a lot of programs on multiple networks may have been a great idea in a different era, when one household that didn't have the USA Network or SyFy, for example, could find WWE programming on the CW. But now, with the Hulu agreement and the ubiquity of YouTube, you can find just about anything online. Why sit through three hours of *Raw* when I can search out the highlights online?

HICKS: That's like saying people won't watch football games when they can just watch *SportsCenter* for highlights. WWE creates episodic programming

that fans specifically tune in to see. It's not just highlight reels.

SAKS: So, Brady, next year at this time, do you see *Raw*'s ratings increasing because these new shows have attracted new fans? Or do you see them decreasing?

HICKS: There are way too many different factors to consider there, Stu. Is The Rock around? Is The Undertaker back? How about Brock Lesnar?

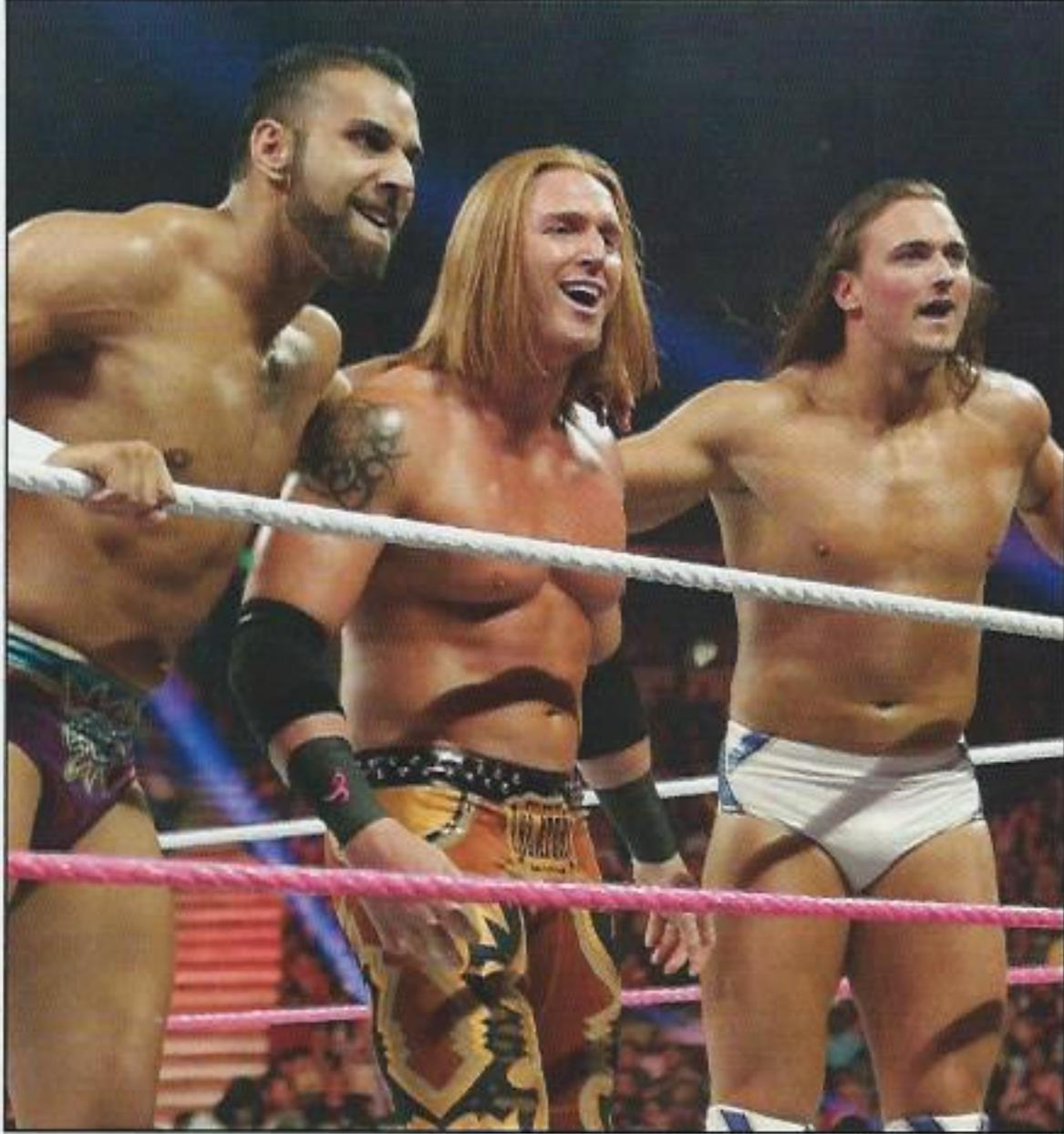
MURPHY: I don't think it matters, Brady. I think the proliferation of these shows—and *Raw*'s move to three hours—will ultimately erode *Raw*'s ratings. We're already seeing a ratings drop. I think that's going to continue.

LENKER: And if WWE loads up its marquee stars on the *Raw* show, as it usually does, I think that will conversely affect the other shows. *Smackdown* is an estab-



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If you want to see tomorrow's WWE champions today, get to your computer and check out the high-flying Seth Rollins and his opponent, Rick Victor, on *NXT*.



Can we live without seeing the unholy alliance of Jinder Mahal, Heath Slater, and Drew McIntyre? Probably, but the three-hour *Raw* provides such mid-carders a chance to shine—and who knows, they may be able to take advantage of it.

lished entity with a strong fan base, and *NXT* has a niche appeal to see the stars of tomorrow. *Saturday Morning Slam* is unique with its time slot and approach. I expect *Main Event* to fizzle.

SAKS: What about *Superstars*?

LENKER: There, that's my point. I forgot about *Superstars*. I've been following wrestling for a quarter of a century and even I can't remember all of WWE's current shows. How can casual fans be expected to keep up?

SAKS: Aside from the impact on ratings, which no one can really predict, how else can this increase in programming affect WWE? Brady?

HICKS: I think these shows allow the WWE spotlight to shine on more wrestlers. It gives people like Tyson Kidd and Seth Rollins a chance to be showcased, and that can help WWE build new stars. I think this is an exciting time for WWE.

MURPHY: If I can play devil's advocate, WWE also runs the risk of having wrestlers pigeonholed by those other shows. If they're not careful, guys like Michael McGillicutty, Kidd, and others can be perceived by fans as "Saturday Morning Slam" guys, meaning they're not good enough to hang with the *Raw* and *Smackdown* crews. That can be more damaging than simply easing them onto the "big two" shows.

LENKER: To use these shows to build stars, WWE has to kill the recaps and vignettes about what happened on *Raw* for these new shows. Present these shows on an equal footing and good things might happen. Otherwise, I think all this new programming just waters down the product.

SAKS: Great insights, guys. Let's end it here. I still have three hours of wrestling to watch on my DVR. □

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ROLL CALL OF CHAMPIONS

For period ended November 1, 2012

Championships highlighted in bold on the "Roll Call Of Champions" have changed hands since our previous issue. The information under the championship listing indicates the date that champion won the title, who the former champion was, and where the match took place.

AAA HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: EL MESIAS
(March 18, 2012; from Jeff Jarrett; Zapopan, Mexico)

AAA TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: JOE LIDER & VAMPIRO
(October 7, 2012; from Abyss & Chessman; San Luis Potosi, Mexico)

ALL JAPAN TRIPLE CROWN CHAMPION: MASAKATSU FUNAKI
(August 26, 2012; from Jun Akiyama; Tokyo, Japan)

ALL JAPAN UNIFIED TAG TEAM CHAMPIONSHIP: VACANT
(Vacated October 30, 2012, by Manabu Soya & Takao Omori)

ALL JAPAN JUNIOR HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: HIROSHI YAMATO
(August 12, 2012; from KAI; Tokyo, Japan)

CMLL HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: EL TERRIBLE
(January 1, 2012; beat Rush for vacant title; Mexico City, Mexico)

CMLL TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: ATLANTIS & DIAMANTE AZUL
(August 3, 2012; from Dragon Rojo & Ultimo Guerrero; Mexico City, Mexico)

EAST COAST WRESTLING ASSOCIATION HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: CHRIS WYLDE
(September 15, 2012; from Papadon; Newark, DE)

ECWA TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: ADEN CHAMBERS & KEKO THE FLYIN' HAWAIIAN
(October 20, 2012; from Chris Rockwell & Sam Shields; Sewell, NJ)

ECWA MID-ATLANTIC CHAMPION: MR. OOH LA LA
(June 2, 2012; from Mike Tartaglia; Newark, DE)

IWGP HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: HIROSHI TANAHASHI
(June 16, 2012; from Kazuchika Okada; Osaka, Japan)

IWGP INTERNATIONAL TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: DAVEY BOY SMITH JR. & LANCE ARCHER
(October 8, 2012; from Hiroyoshi Tenzan & Satoshi Kojima; Tokyo, Japan)

IWGP JUNIOR HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: LOW-KI
(October 8, 2012; from Kota Ibushi; Tokyo, Japan)

MARYLAND CHAMPIONSHIP WRESTLING HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: NUI TOFIGA
(April 6, 2012; from Tyler Hilton; Dundalk, MD)

MCW TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: C-FED & G-FED
(April 6, 2012; from Drolix & Marcus Streets; Dundalk, MD)

NWA HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: VACANT
(Vacated October 27, 2012, by Adam Pearce)

NWA TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: KORY CHAVIS & JON DAVIS
(May 15, 2011; from A.J. Steele & Murder-One; Warner Robins, GA)

NWA JUNIOR HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: CHASE OWENS
(October 13, 2012; beat Matt Conard & Zac Vincent in tournament final for vacant title; Kingsport, TN)

NWA WOMEN'S CHAMPION: KACEE CARLISLE
(October 20, 2012; from Tasha Simone; Lebanon, TN)

OHIO VALLEY WRESTLING HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: CRIMSON
(September 12, 2012; from Johnny Spade; Louisville, KY)

OWW SOUTHERN TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: JESSIE GODDERZ & RUDY SWITCHBLADE
(July 7, 2012; beat Paredyse & Brandon Espinosa for vacant title; Louisville, KY)

OWW TV CHAMPION: CLIFF COMPTON
(October 17, 2012; from Alex Silva; Louisville, KY)

OWW WOMEN'S CHAMPION: HEIDI LOVELACE
(September 15, 2012; from Taeler Hendrix; Elizabethtown, KY)

PRO WRESTLING GUERRILLA CHAMPION: KEVIN STEEN
(March 17, 2012; from El Generico; Reseda, CA)

PWG TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: PLAYER UNO & STUPEFIED
(May 25, 2012; beat Matt & Nick Jackson for vacant title; Reseda, CA)

PRO WRESTLING NOAH GLOBAL HONORED CROWN CHAMPION: TAKESHI MORISHIMA
(January 22, 2012; from Go Shiozaki; Osaka, Japan)

PRO WRESTLING NOAH GLOBAL HONORED CROWN JUNIOR HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: SHUJI KONDO
(September 29, 2012; from Yoshinobu Kanemaru; Tokyo, Japan)

PRO WRESTLING NOAH GLOBAL HONORED CROWN TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: AKITOSHI SAITO & GO SHIOZAKI
(October 26, 2012; from KENTA & Maybach Taniguchi; Niigata, Japan)

RING OF HONOR HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: KEVIN STEEN
(May 12, 2012; from Davey Richards; Toronto, ON)

ROH TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: JIMMY JACOBS & STEVE CORINO
(September 15, 2012; beat Charlie Haas & Rhett Titus in final round of tournament for vacant title)

ROH TV CHAMPION: ADAM COLE
(June 29, 2012; from Roderick Strong; Baltimore, MD)

SHIMMER CHAMPION: SARAYA KNIGHT
(March 18, 2011; from Cheerleader Melissa; Berwyn, IL)

TNA WORLD CHAMPION: JEFF HARDY
(October 14, 2012; from Austin Aries; Phoenix, AZ)

TNA WORLD TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: CHAVO GUERRERO JR. & HERNANDEZ
(October 14, 2012; from Christopher Daniels & Kazarian; Phoenix, AZ)

TNA X DIVISION CHAMPION: ROB VAN DAM
(October 14, 2012; from Zema Ion; Phoenix, AZ)

TNA TV CHAMPION: SAMOA JOE
(September 27, 2012; beat Mr. Anderson to fill vacant title; Orlando, FL)

TNA KNOCKOUTS CHAMPION: TARA
(October 14, 2012; from Miss Tessmacher; Phoenix, AZ)

TNA KNOCKOUTS TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: ERIC YOUNG & ODB
(February 23, 2012; from Gail Kim & Madison Rayne; Orlando, FL)

WWE CHAMPION: CM PUNK
(November 20, 2011; from Alberto Del Rio; New York, NY)

WWE TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: KANE & DANIEL BRYAN
(September 16, 2012; from R-Truth & Kofi Kingston; Boston, MA)

WWE INTERCONTINENTAL CHAMPION: KOFI KINGSTON
(October 16, 2012; from The Miz; Memphis, TN)

WWE WORLD CHAMPION: THE BIG SHOW
(October 28, 2012; from Sheamus; Atlanta, GA)

WWE U.S. CHAMPION: ANTONIO CESARO
(August 19, 2012; from Santino Marella; Los Angeles, CA)

WWE DIVAS CHAMPION: EVE TORRES
(September 16, 2012; from Layla; Boston, MA)

WWE NXT HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: SETH ROLLINS
(July 26, 2012; beat Jinder Mahal in tournament final; Winter Park, FL)

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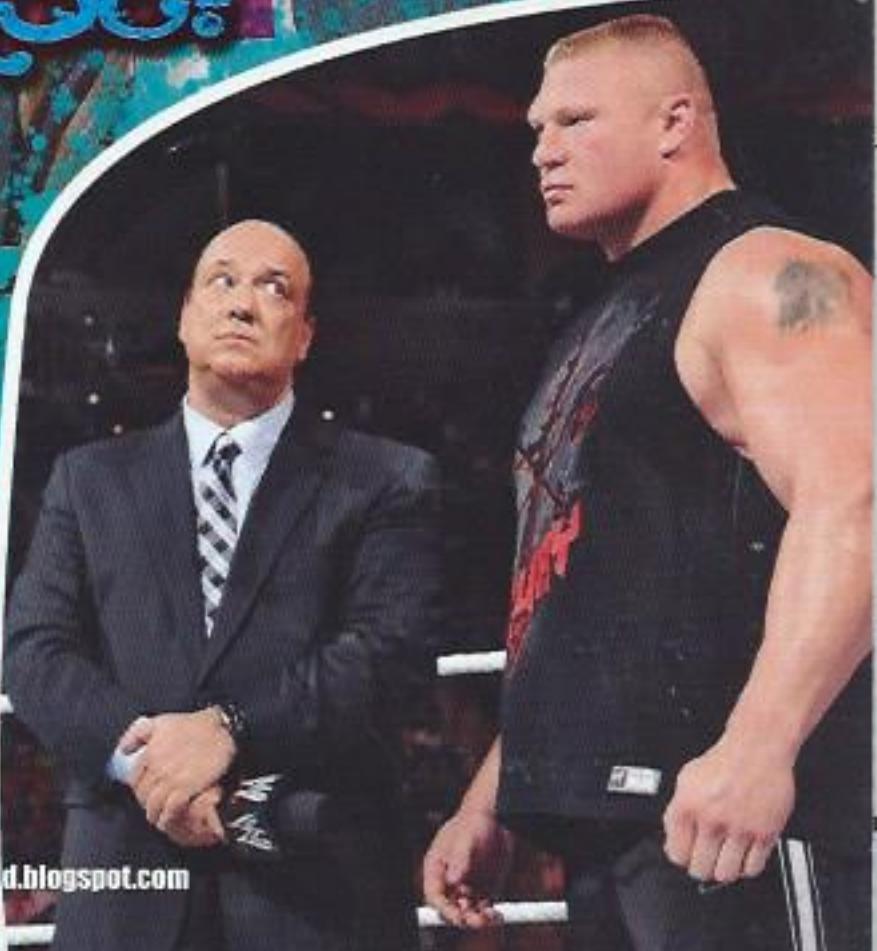
Tag Team Revival: For Real?

Kevin Steen in TNA/WWE?

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WHAT'S HAPPENING

BY DAN MURPHY

IT'S SAD TO hear of the death of any wrestler, but it's tragic when the cause of death is suicide.

On September 22, **Mike Graham**, the popular son of Hall of Famer **Eddie Graham**, shot himself in the head at his home in Daytona Beach, Florida. He was 61. Graham was an accomplished wrestler who had his best success in the tag team ranks, winning titles most frequently with **Steve Keirn** and **Kevin Sullivan**. He went on to follow in his father's footsteps, promoting shows in Florida, and also worked as a road agent for WCW. He was voted Rookie of the Year by readers of our magazines in 1972. Eddie Graham himself committed suicide in a similar manner in 1985.

Four days before Mike Graham took his life, **Marvin Lambert**, who performed primarily in CZW and IWA: Mid-South as **Brain Damage**, also committed suicide, presumably to escape the pain of accumulated injuries. Lambert won the CZW Iron Man championship twice in 2008. He was 34.

More sad news: **Brad Armstrong** died from an undisclosed disease at age 51 on November 1. One of the real gentlemen of the sport, Brad grew up in the business, the son of "Bullet" **Bob Armstrong** and the brother of **Steve**, **Scott**,

and **Brian Armstrong**. The 1982 *Pro Wrestling Illustrated* Rookie of the Year was a two-time NWA National heavyweight and tag team champion and a longtime Georgia Championship Wrestling and WCW star.

In October, a powerhouse with an endless appetite took the mantle as WWE's next breakout star, and a marquee star with a spotty track record earned another run as World champion.

Ryback headlined his first pay-per-view, Hell in a Cell on October 28, receiving a shot at **CM Punk's** WWE championship, replacing the injured **John Cena**. The Punk/Ryback bout created an intriguing dilemma for WWE. For several months, Punk vs. **The Rock** had been the presumptive WWE championship match for the 2013 Royal Rumble. Ryback's rapid ascent and momentum threatened to jeopardize that marquee matchup, while some insiders privately wondered whether Ryback was ready for the main-event level.

As it turned out, Punk was able to turn aside his challenger, thanks to an assist from referee **Brad Maddox**. Maddox hit Ryback with a low blow and administered a fast count, allowing Punk to steal a tainted victory.

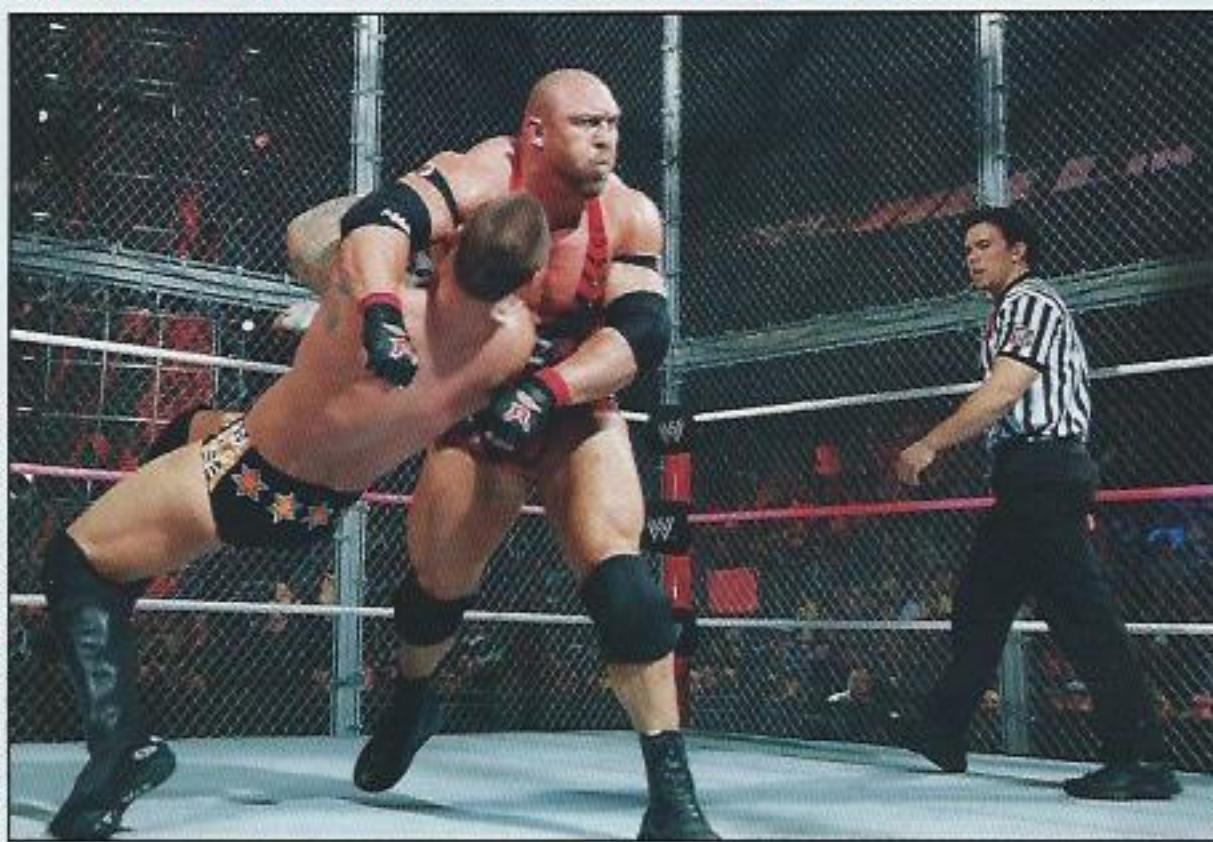
After the match, Ryback chased Punk to the top of the cage, and dropped the champion with a Shellshock slam.

Also at Hell in a Cell, **The Big Show** captured his sixth world championship (including WCW) with a victory over **Sheamus**.

While WWE was welcoming a new face to the main-event scene, TNA crowned **Jeff Hardy** World champion at Bound For Glory.

Hardy grabbed his third TNA World title on October 14 in Phoenix, Arizona, with a win over **Austin Aries**. In something of a surprise, Hardy—TNA's most popular star—was booed by a sizeable portion of the audience, a fact Aries rubbed in Hardy's face a week later on *Impact*. Hardy scored the pinfall

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In the biggest match of his budding career, Ryback levels CM Punk with a clothesline at Hell in a Cell. Keeping his distance is referee Brad Maddox, who would play a crucial role in the finish.

Wrestling lost one of its true nice guys when Brad Armstrong died of an undisclosed illness at just 51 years old.





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Also at HIAC, The Big Show added to his Hall of Fame credentials by ending Sheamus' World title reign at 210 days.

after connecting with a Twist of Fate and a Swanton Bomb at the 23:03 mark of a back-and-forth contest.

The win makes Hardy a six-time combined world champion (including WWE and WWE World title reigns), but this win might have been the sweetest of all. A year-and-a-half earlier, Hardy humiliated himself at Victory Road when he competed in an inebriated state. Hardy was sent home by TNA, and his career seemed to be in jeopardy. Since then, he has turned things around and has received another chance at being the company standard-bearer (see feature story in *Inside Wrestling*, page 18).

Hardy wasn't the only former WWE competitor to win title gold at BFG. **Rob Van Dam** beat **Zema Ion** for the X division title, **Tara** defeated **Miss Tessmacher** for the Knockouts title, and **Chavo Guerrero Jr.** and **Hernandez** won the tag team title from **Christopher Daniels** and **Kazarian** in a three-way that also included **Kurt Angle** and **AJ Styles**. Not a bad night for the WWE alums.

In other Bound For Glory news, the masked **Aces & Eights** faction won their way into TNA, as two members defeated the team of **Sting** and **Bully Ray**. Many fans expected that Ray would turn against his partner, but the turncoat proved to be **Devon**, who interfered, slamming Ray through a table. Devon, who had parted ways with the company in September, maintains that he is not the leader of the Aces & Eights group, however. As of press time, that mystery remained unsolved.

Jim Cornette has been relieved of his duties as Ring of Honor booker and has been replaced by **Hunter Johnston**, professionally known as **Delirious**. Cornette remains the executive producer of the television program. While there

were pros and cons to Cornette's traditional booking style, the company has been struggling to attract new fans since being acquired by Sinclair Broadcasting.

At Glory by Honor on October 13, ROH champion **Kevin Steen** successfully defended his championship against what many believe to have been his toughest challenger to date, **Michael Elgin**, who was competing in front of a hometown crowd in Mississauga, Ontario. Steen scored the clean win with a package piledriver off the middle rope after a 30-minute match. Following the bout, color commentator **Nigel McGuinness** presented Steen with a package that had been delivered to him earlier in the night. Steen opened the box to reveal an **Ei Generico** mask, signaling what promises to be an explosive feud between the former tag team champions.

The final pay-per-view numbers are in on WrestleMania 28, and now it is official: WM 28 received the highest PPV orders in the event's history at 1,253,000, eclipsing WM 23 by 3,000 buys. The breakdown of U.S. orders vs. international orders is particularly interesting. U.S.: 733,000; international: 520,000.

Hulk Hogan has reportedly settled his lawsuit against long-time friend **Bubba the Love Sponge (Todd Clem)**, stemming from the release of a sex tape featuring Hogan and Clem's then-wife, **Heather**. Hogan had claimed that he was filmed without his knowledge and had accused Bubba of being responsible for the release of the tape. Bubba retaliated with a nasty rant against Hogan on his radio show, where he called Hogan a hypocrite and accused Hogan of releasing the tape himself. Terms of the settlement are confidential.



Sting holds Devon in place as General Manager Hulk Hogan moves in. Certainly, Devon's not going to get any help from Bully Ray, who watches this incredible Bound For Glory moment from the corner.

Regardless of who bears the responsibility of releasing the tape and results of the lawsuits Hogan filed against the website Gawker for posting a clip from the tape and Heather Clem, Hogan's public image suffered damage that may be irreparable. Hogan's once squeaky-clean reputation has been tarnished several times in recent years. The sex tape scandal involving his best friend's wife is both disturbing and disheartening. It will be interesting to see if Hogan's damaged reputation will affect his on-air role in TNA or his job as a commercial pitchman for Rent-A-Center.

Mexican star **Hector Garza** has announced his retirement from wrestling after being diagnosed with lung cancer. Garza was the reigning Perros del Mal Mexican National heavyweight champion. He had also competed in the WWF, WCW, and TNA over the course of his 20-year career. During his run in TNA, he became the top contender to **Jeff Jarrett's** NWA heavyweight title, but his run came to an abrupt end when he was arrested for possession of steroids and deported back to Mexico in 2005.

SHIMMER champion **"Sweet" Sara-ya Knight** may not be popular with the fans, but she silenced many of her critics during the weekend of October 27-28, when she successfully defended her championship against **Athena**, **Kellie Skater**, and former champion **Cheerleader Melissa** in three separate bouts. Also receiving rave reviews was the

match between **Kana** (of the Japanese promotion Wrestling New Classic) and **Ayako Hamada**, who tore down the house with an intense, hard-hitting singles bout. Hamada scored the pinfall, but both women earned a standing ovation from the fans in the Berwyn Eagles Club.

"Beautiful" Bobby Eaton, 54, is recovering after being hospitalized for eight days in Arkansas with pneumonia and heart issues.

The **George Tragos/Lou Thesz** Wrestling Hall of Fame has announced its 2013 inductees. The Waterloo, Iowa, institution honors amateur wrestling competitors who became stars in professional wrestling. The Class of 2013 is **Ric Flair**, **Bill Watts**, and Olympic super heavyweight **Chris Taylor**.

"Scrap Iron" Adam Pearce relinquished the NWA heavyweight title when Alliance officials opted not to sanction the seventh match of his Seven Levels of Hate series with **Colt Cabana**. Unfortunately for Colt, he won the match in Australia but has nothing to show for it.

In a strange story, **Vader** and 69-year-old **Harley**

Race got into a fistfight at a recent fan convention in New Jersey. The two exchanged words at the Legends of the Ring convention when Race allegedly punched Vader, whom he managed in WCW in the early-1990s. Vader attempted to hit Race, according to reports, but struck a bystander. The situation was eventually defused, but it speaks volumes for the personalities of each man—Race for standing up to a 350-pound behemoth and Vader for trying to punch a man six months shy of his 70th birthday. □



Harley Race signs an autograph for a fan in 2011. The seven-time NWA World champion, now 69, very nearly had a brawl with his former charge Vader, apparently over the manner in which Big Van was dealing with fans at a "Legends Of The Ring" convention.

ON ASSIGNMENT

IDON'T WANT to write about Ryback. I don't want to write about his ridiculous "Feed Me More" catchphrase or the dozens of parodies it has spawned ("Feed Me S'mores" is a personal favorite).

I don't want to write about his unflattering, airbrushed singlet. I don't want to write about the jagged pebbles in his gums that pass for his teeth. I don't want to write about the fact that the first few notes of his entrance music have been stuck in my head for days, playing on an unending loop, like the kind of sadistic audio torture the U.S. military used to drive Manuel Noriega out of Vatican sanctuary in 1989.

I don't want to make hackneyed com-

parisons to Goldberg (it's way too early to do that).

I'd prefer to write about a dozen other topics: the recent five-star classic between Hiroshi Tanahashi and Minoru Suzuki, the parallels between the pairing of CM Punk and Paul Heyman with the pairing of Nick Bockwinkel and Bobby Heenan. Heck, I could probably burn 900 words talking about how much cuter A.J. Lee's outfits are since she decided to ditch Stephanie McMahon's hand-me-down business suits and develop her own look.

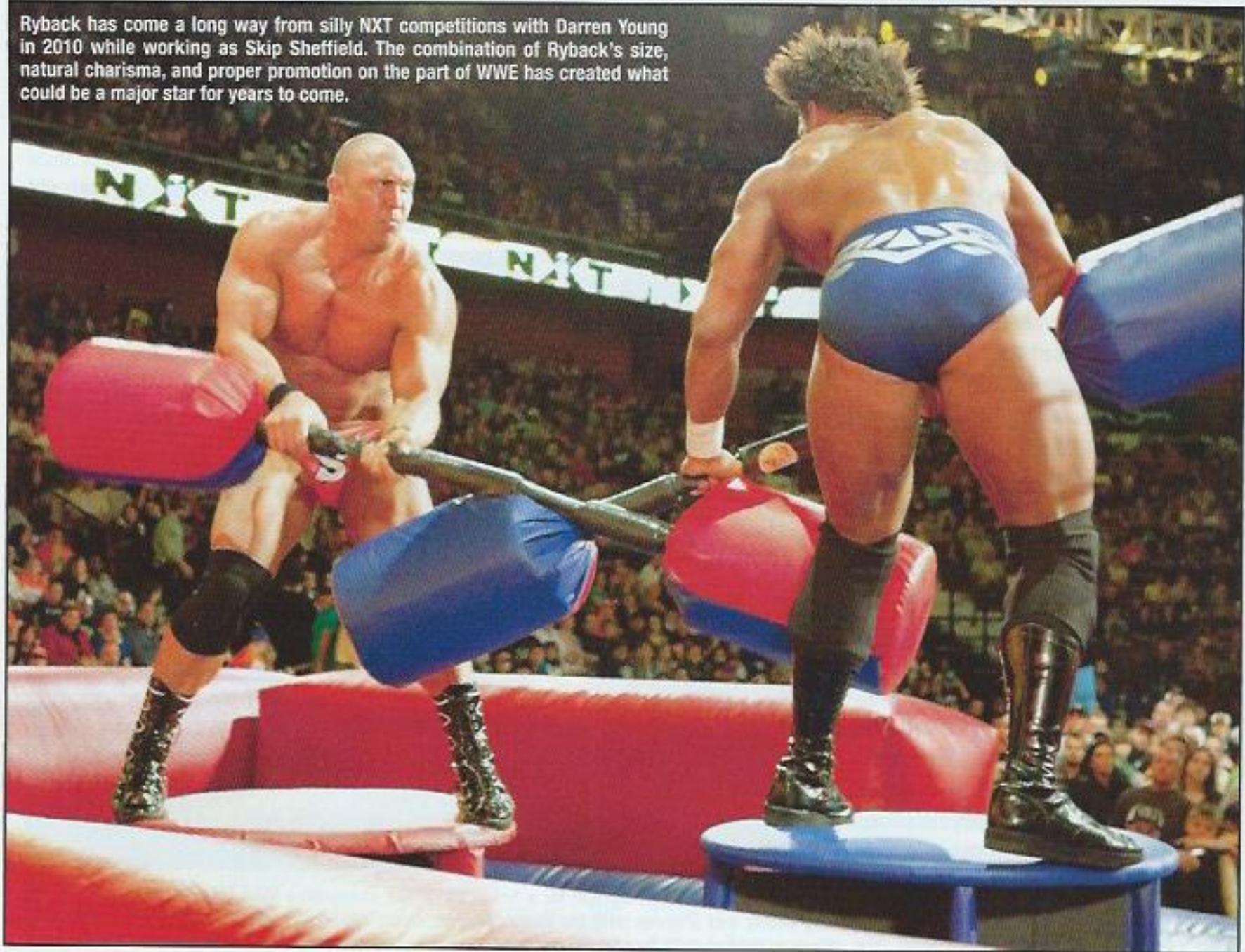
But I keep coming back to Ryback.

So it looks like I'm writing about "Big Hungry."

It's hard not to have Ryback on the mind these days. Since he backed down CM Punk backstage as Punk was harassing Mick Foley, the NXT Season One alum has become a bona fide main-event attraction. His ascent has been notable simply because it was so unlikely.

This is the same guy who used to compete as Skip Sheffield and was referred to as "The Corn-Fed Meathead." He was one of the first NXT competitors eliminated from contention, ahead of both Darren Young and Heath Slater. In fact, when you consider that Daniel Bryan and Sheffield were two of the first three people eliminated in that competi-

Ryback has come a long way from silly NXT competitions with Darren Young in 2010 while working as Skip Sheffield. The combination of Ryback's size, natural charisma, and proper promotion on the part of WWE has created what could be a major star for years to come.



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Ryback's been fed pretty easy fodder in handicap matches for a while, but beating former champions Primo and Epico in a match in which the referee did not enforce tags was a major step up.

tion (along with Michael Tarver), it really makes you question the judging skills of the people involved with that contest.

A broken ankle kept Sheffield on the sidelines until he returned as Ryback. Just like that, the "aww-shucks" meat-head was an unstoppable juggernaut. His wrestling style hadn't changed much; he was still a one-dimensional power merchant with unproven stamina. At first blush, he was just another in a long line of musclebound brawlers, no different from Mason Ryan, Ezekiel Jackson, and dozens of other WWE flashes-in-the-pan.

Yet somehow, in the span of just a few months, Ryback has caught lightning in a bottle and WWE has a new breakout star on its hands. There are three big reasons why Ryback became a sensation, when so many before him flamed out:

1. He kept his mouth shut. With every wrestler constantly bragging about his own prowess and threatening his oppo-

nents, the strong, silent types stand out. As Sheffield, Ryback wasn't a particularly gifted speaker. He has learned that actions speak louder than words, and he has kept the focus on his freakish physicality instead of his verbal skills. "Feed Me More" was all he needed to say; that little nugget summed up his attitude and implicitly promised that he would soon be facing a higher level of competition. After every win and every "Feed Me More" chant, fans were encouraged to anticipate his next matchup, and that built a sense of anticipation.

2. He was protected. Ryback never had Triple-H or John Cena make cutesy insults about him. Look at how Jack Swagger was killed off once Christian teased him for his lisp. The announcers didn't drift off into discussing current events during Ryback's matches. He wasn't set up to participate in silly skits that wrecked his no-nonsense persona.

He wasn't rushed into matches that could ruin his aura (against Kane or The Big Show, for example) or against opponents whose style might clash with his (such as Brodus Clay or Sin Cara). He was put in a position where he could succeed or fail on his own merits.

3. CM Punk. For all of Punk's talk of being "the best in the world" and for all the accolades bestowed upon him, perhaps the truest acknowledgement of Punk's greatness has been his ability to "make" Ryback. They say the best wrestlers are able to make their opponents look like gold. Ric Flair was able to do that throughout his career, making mediocre wrestlers like Lex Luger and Nikita Koloff look like world-beaters. Triple-H, on the other hand, was frequently criticized for burying opponents and making them look lousy, which some critics say is a reason WWE struggled so much to build new stars during the HHH era. The first time Punk went face-to-face with Ryback, he froze with fear as the Raw telecast faded to black. When Ryback confronted him in the ring, Punk ran for the hills. Punk's actions, reactions, and facial expressions have solidified Ryback as a legitimate title contender. It's really quite incredible.

After countless failed efforts, WWE has finally rediscovered the winning formula for creating a new star. Take a wrestler with the right physical gifts, let him develop without taking potshots at him, and feed him the right competition.

Like it or not, I think I'll be writing about Ryback for a long time to come. □

ON THE FARM

BY LOUIE DEE

SETH ROLLINS WAS roughly three months into his reign as NXT champion when this column was penned, and he has been just as impressive with the NXT gold as he was with the old Florida heavyweight championship belt around his waist.

Since defeating Jinder Mahal in the finals of the tournament to crown the first NXT champion, Rollins has defended the title nearly every week, defeating a variety of different opponents to cement his claim as the "fightingest champion of all-time." In addition to topping NXT stalwarts such as Rick Victor, Erick Rowan, and Big E Langston, Rollins has also made a name for himself by turning back the challenges of a handful of WWE stars.

The NXT champ defeated Michael McGillicutty on the October 10 episode of *NXT TV*, beat both Cody Rhodes and

Kassius Ohno in a triple-threat match in a September live event in Fort Pierce, and recently turned back "The One Man Band" Heath Slater in a hard-fought contest taped for an installment of *NXT TV*.

Rollins has also rubbed elbows with WWE's elite, teaming with WWE champion CM Punk at a late-August event to defeat WWE U.S. champion Antonio Cesaro and Kassius Ohno, the duo who, as The Kings of Wrestling, were one of the most dominant teams on the independent circuit for several years.

While the former Ring of Honor and FCW champion has turned back everyone so far, it appears as if a new number-one contender may be emerging—and it's the man he beat earlier in 2012 to win the now-defunct FCW title.

That man is Leo Kruger, and the South African has put together quite a winning

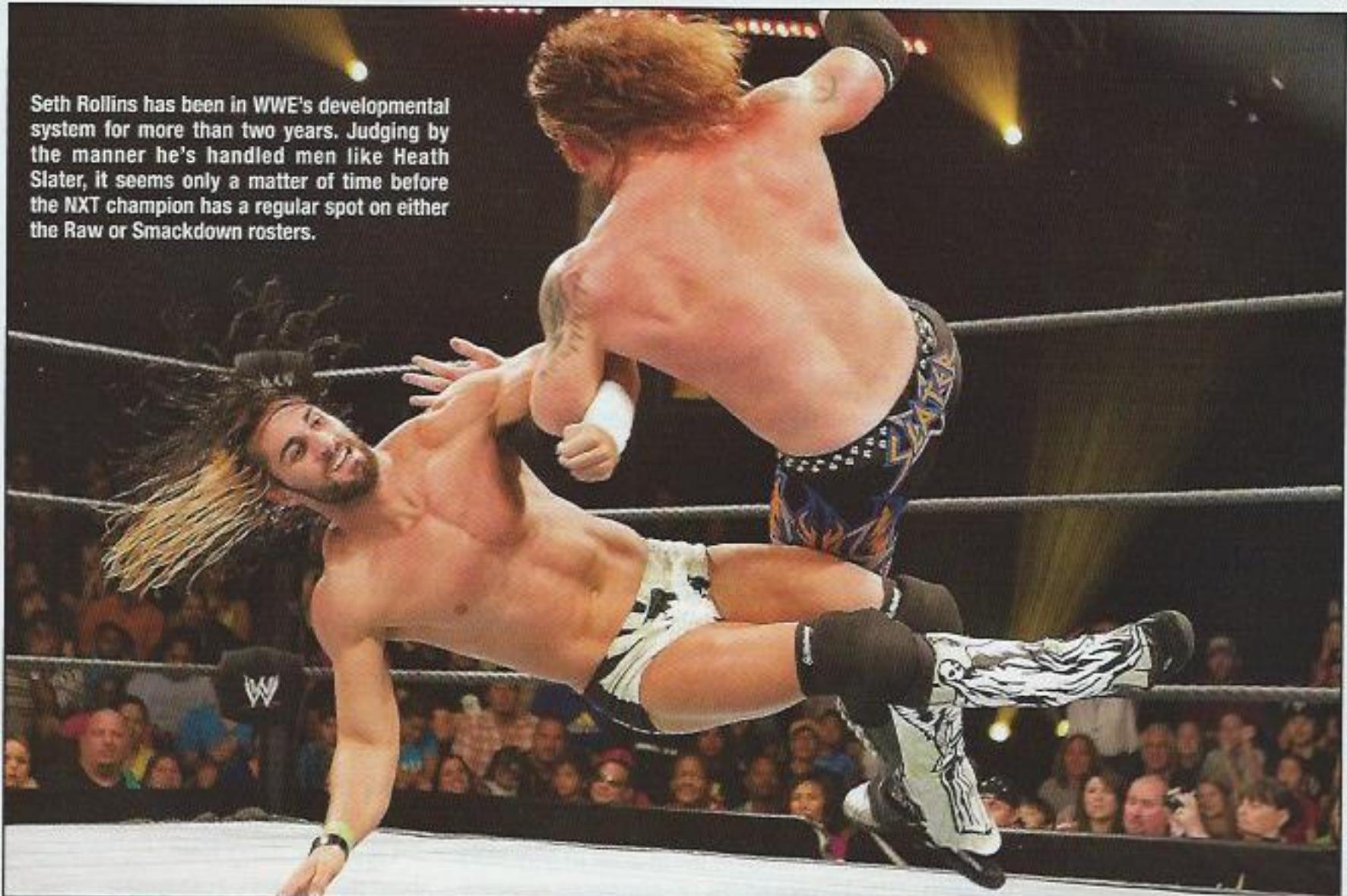
streak on *NXT TV* as of late. He is undefeated on NXT's showcase since July, defeating men like Jake Carter, Dante Dash, Xavier Woods, and Trent Barreta with the twisting version of a Diamond Cutter that he calls "Kruger's End."

The two have yet to meet with NXT gold on the line, but it may only be a matter of time before they rekindle their rivalry in the ring.

On the main roster, WWE's tag team division is burgeoning once again, and the early-autumn episodes of *NXT TV* also frequently featured a brewing rivalry between a team that's been there for a while and one that hopes to grace the screens of USA or Syfy in the near future.

The Usos and The Ascension (Kenneth Cameron & Connor O'Brian) have waged quite a war in NXT over the past few months. As of press time, the score was

Seth Rollins has been in WWE's developmental system for more than two years. Judging by the manner he's handled men like Heath Slater, it seems only a matter of time before the NXT champion has a regular spot on either the Raw or Smackdown rosters.



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almost even between the two teams, but Cameron and O'Brian came up big in teaming with Ohno on the October 17 episode of *NXT TV* to defeat Jimmy and Jey Uso and Richie Steamboat in a heated six-man tag.

The Ascension also scored a win over another team that took part in the WWE Tag Team Number-One Contender' Tournament, Justin Gabriel and Tyson Kidd, in early-October, so it could be just a matter of time before they *ascend* to the WWE Universe.

If they do, however, they may have to do so without their manager, Raquel Diaz. The third-generation Diva and daughter of Eddie and Vickie Guerrero is currently on hiatus from NXT. Diaz requested a release from her WWE developmental deal in late-September for personal reasons, but was instead sent home, with WWE brass hoping some time off may change her mind.

In other NXT news, this autumn has seen the debuts of a pair of former college football stars and another second-generation lucha libre star.

The latter is Memo Montenegro, who is better known to lucha fans as Guillermo Rodriguez, and he has quite a remarkable pedigree: His father is Dos Caras, his uncle is WWE Hall of Famer Mil Mascaras, and his older brother is former WWE champion Alberto Del Rio.

Fresh from the gridiron, Mojo Rawley is the in-ring moniker of former University of Maryland defensive lineman Dean Muhtadi, while former Texas Tech University All-American offensive lineman Brandon Carter is now competing in NXT as TAC.

Meanwhile, up in Louisville, the roll call of OVW champions not only includes two TNA stars in OVW champion Crimson and Southern tag team champion Jessie Godderz (with Rudy Switchblade), but also a man best known for his time in WWE.

That man is Cliff Compton, who defeated TNA Gut Check winner Alex Silva on the October 20 episode of *OVW TV* to



PHOTO BY CHARLES PARRISH

The strain of wrestling with a prosthetic left leg has forced Michael Hayes to take a hiatus from the sport. Hopefully, the inspirational Iraq war vet will be back someday.

win the TV championship and become the ninth man to win OVW's "Triple Crown." The former Domino was a three-time Southern tag team champion with Deuce back in 2006, and also held the OVW heavyweight championship twice in 2011.

Finally, on a sad note, fans in the Davis Arena saw perhaps the final OVW appearance of Michael Hayes on October 17. Flanked by partner James "Moose" Thomas, the fan favorite revealed that wrestling has taken such a toll on his body that doctors have told him to step away from the ring for now. Even if his hiatus turns out to be permanent, Hayes, who was born and raised in Louisville, said he was proud to live out his dream and that his

spirit will live on in Davis Arena forever.

Back in 2006, Hayes was serving an Armed Forces mission in Iraq when his HUMVEE was blown up in an attack. He was the lone survivor, but his left leg had to be amputated and he was told he may never walk again. However, after intense physical therapy, Hayes did just that and decided to pursue his squared circle dreams, eventually graduating from OVW's wrestling school and becoming a top contender to the Southern tag team championship with Thomas in 2012.

"On The Farm" sends out its best wishes to Hayes, who hopefully will be able to step into the ring and live his dream at least one more time. □

THUMBS UP



PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

Thumbs Up to Jim Ross. We all knew that Ross was one of the best wrestling announcers ever. What so many of us failed to realize is just how easily "Good Ol' JR" could turn the other cheek as well. It was perplexing to see Ross tell Vince McMahon he considered him a close friend on a recent edition of *Raw*. Could his memory really be that bad? Even the most casual wrestling fans will remember how McMahon has spent almost 20 years embarrassing, ridiculing, even assaulting him. Maybe the two have finally turned the corner. We hope so. Either way, Ross should be lauded for his capacity for forgiveness.

Thumbs Up to Jim Cornette. When exactly did Cornette take time off from Ring of Honor for sensitivity training? The now-former ROH authority figure took the news of his demotion like a champion this

past October, even pledging to continue supporting and helping his successor despite no longer being on TV or having any authority over the roster. In his heyday, Jim Cornette was one of those guys nobody wanted as an enemy because he was so vocal and hot-headed. We find this new version of Jim Cornette extremely likeable ... but where did "The Louisville Slugger" go?



PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

Thumbs Up to Kelly Kelly.

We'll be the first to admit that our selection of Kelly Kelly is a nostalgic, emotional pick. It is so hard to believe that it has been six years since wide-eyed, 19-year-old bikini model Barbie Blank first showed up on our TV screens. Many fans criticized her because she was so limited in what she could do in the ring. Somewhere along the way, though, she got better, became a Divas champion, and even started to earn the admiration of the fans. We have no idea what the future holds for this female star. What we can say is that if she puts as much effort into her next endeavor as she did wrestling, she'll be a success.

Thumbs Up to Zema Ion. After winning the TNA X championship last July, Ion did some downright despicable things to hold on to his title

belt. Perhaps that is why it was so surprising—and refreshing—to see Ion readily accept the challenge of Rob Van Dam at Bound For Glory. No doubt, Ion was overwhelmed against his considerably more experienced opponent. Whatever you think of Ion as a competitor, however, he did the right thing in giving RVD the title match. A big part of being a great champion is defending against all comers. Even though he lost, Ion proved he had the heart of one such champion.

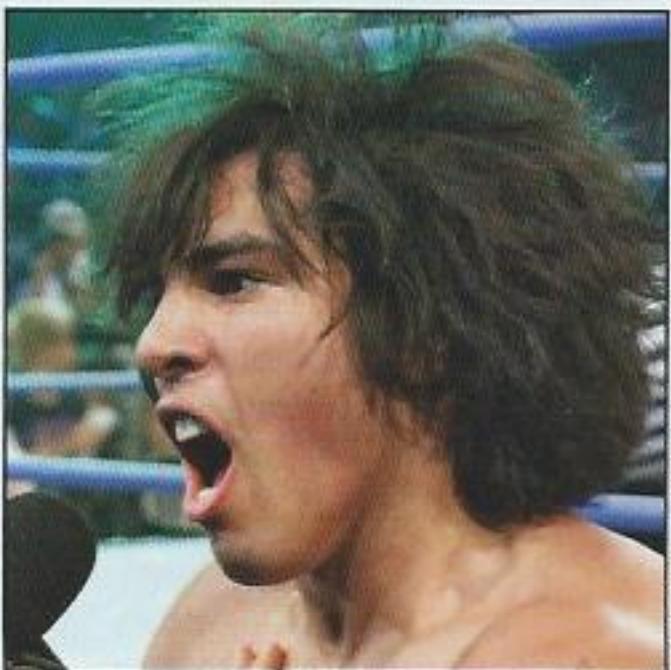


PHOTO BY LEE SOUTHWINA WRESTLING

THUMBS DOWN



PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

Thumbs Down to The Miz. It must be tough for The Miz to find new ways to earn his "Thumbs Down" just about every issue. We'd say he topped himself this time. It was absolutely despicable for Miz to ridicule Larry King and his wife, Shawn, during a live *Raw* segment this October. While everything he said about having had only slightly more titles than King has had wives is true, it doesn't make it any less disrespectful. The Miz had a real opportunity to paint his company in a positive light with a legitimate broadcasting legend. Instead, he just reminded us of what a jerk he is.

Thumbs Down to James Storm. Is Storm better in the ring than Bobby Roode? Arguably he is, but now we may never really know. At Bound For Glory, Storm had a real opportunity to make a statement against his former Beer

Money partner. Unfortunately, that chance just shattered like a glass beer bottle across Roode's forehead. Sure, we do understand the level of anger and frustration that Storm had to feel. After all, he had been the victim of a number of cheap tricks by Roode over the past year. However, we cannot condone Storm stooping to Roode's level, confirming the belief of many that he cannot beat him one on one.

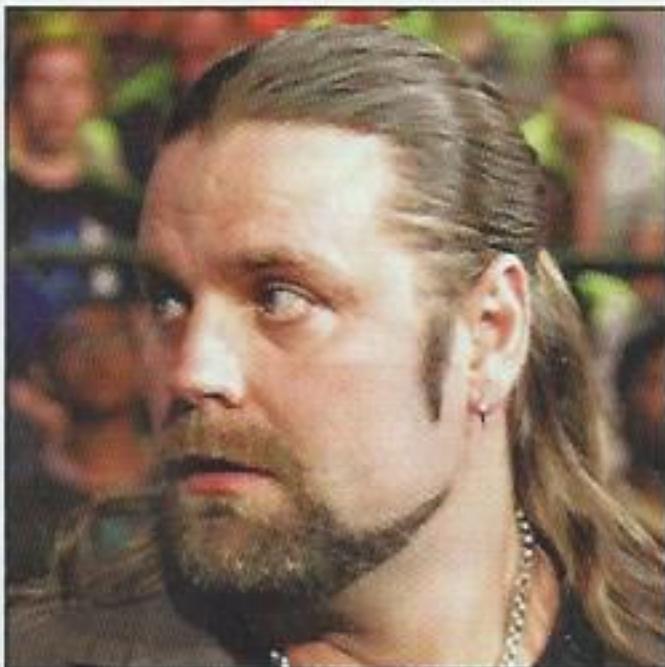


PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/TNA WRESTLING

Thumbs Down to Devon. Former TV champion Devon deserves to be jeered for the way he turned against his TNA brethren Sting and Bully Ray, giving Aces & Eights the win at Bound For Glory. When Devon's contract with TNA expired earlier this year and he left the company, his departure came with a surprising amount of fanfare. It seemed that Devon was a beloved member of the lockerroom, with everyone from Hulk Hogan to Sting to TNA President Dixie Carter having nothing but good things to say about him. Nobody in the company was under any obligation to speak so highly of the former Team 3-D member, especially once he was gone. Couldn't he have returned the favor at least a little?

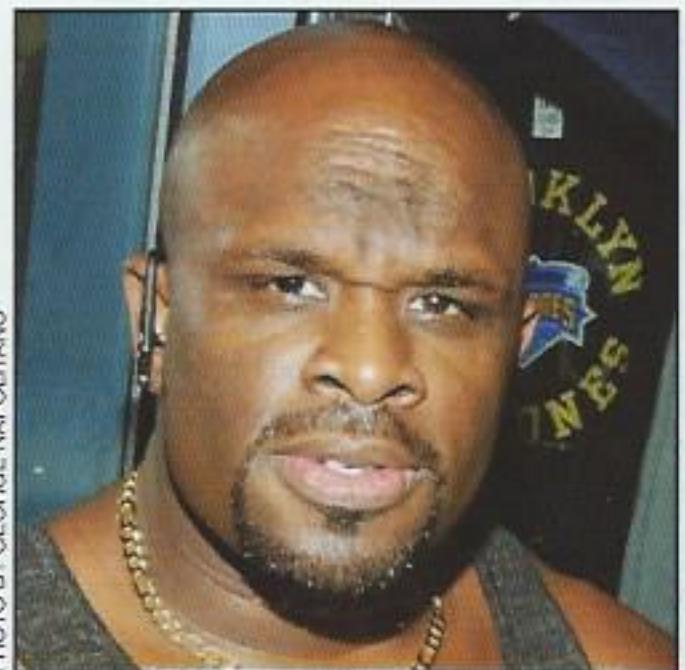


PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

Thumbs Down to Kevin Steen. A day before his scheduled Glory by Honor ROH title defense against Michael Elgin in Toronto, Steen posted a video issuing a statement that if certain demands weren't met by the company, he would not wrestle. Some of these demands were frivolous, but most were very serious. ROH decided to cave to his demands that the package piledriver be legalized and that he never have to wrestle Jay Lethal again. Frankly, we expect boorish behavior from Steen, but for ROH to acquiesce in this manner is shameful. To its credit, ROH didn't want to disappoint its fans, but in the long run, the wiser decision may have been to tell Steen to take a hike and strip him of the title.



PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

WORKIN' STIFF

BY AL CASTLE

RECENTLY, A WELL-RESPECTED independent wrestler posted on his Facebook page a photo of an overweight, pimple-faced "wrestling fan" wearing glasses and his hair in a ponytail. The caption read: "I've never been in the ring. But I know what it takes to have a five-star match."

No fewer than 57 people "liked" the photo. Eleven shared it with their own friends. And a few fans and fellow wrestlers alike "laughed out loud" at it, at least according to their comments.

And why wouldn't they? I mean what's more preposterous than thinking some nerdy wrestling fan might know what a good match looks like?

I know what's more preposterous: assuming that he doesn't.

There are few things I find more an-

noying and offensive in this sport than wrestlers and promoters dismissing their critics with the lazy and ignorant retort, "What would he know? He's just a fan." Even on its surface, it's an absurd argument. After all, aren't wrestlers in the entertainment game? As such, whose opinion could possibly be more important than that of the very fans they are trying to entertain?

It's true that some fans' opinions carry more weight than others'. In my three decades following the sport, I've sat next to both know-it-all blowhards at live events and knowledgeable, informed fans. But in both cases, one thing held true: How much they did or did not know about wrestling had absolutely nothing to do with whether they had ever stepped inside a wrestling ring before.

I've never acted in a film before, but I can tell you that *The Godfather* was a heck of a film, and *Sex And The City 2* was about as bad as one can be. I can't sing or play the guitar, but I can tell the difference between the talents of The Beatles and Nickelback.

In any form of art or entertainment, the best and most-respected critics are those that have dedicated their lives to studying that particular genre. Over the course of years and years of following it, they learn what works, what doesn't, and why that is. And whether or not they can do it better themselves is irrelevant.

That's not to say that having wrestling experience won't give you a valuable perspective on the sport that someone who never competed in a match couldn't possibly have. It's why some of the best announcers in any sport are former competitors. I, too, gained a new appreciation for wrestling earlier this year when I had the opportunity to witness a training session at the New York Wrestling Connection school on Long Island, New York. To be sure, in those few hours I learned some lessons that I never did in all my years as a fan. Never again would I take for granted something as rudimentary as properly bouncing off the ropes.

And I'd agree with any wrestler who would prescribe a month in wrestling school to any idiot fan with the gall to chant "You [messed] up!" from ringside whenever a move is not executed to perfection. That kind of idiotic criticism has zero value.

But I'd like to think that well before I took my first-ever bodyslam by head NYWC trainer Tony Nese, I was able to recognize a five-star match when I saw one. And I'd bet that no wrestler involved in any of the matches that I've considered great would question the legitimacy of my critique.



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The horrible 2010 match between Kaitlyn and Maxine was berated even by the announcers, Michael Cole and Josh Mathews. As bad as it was, the women learned from the experience and would put on better performances in the months to come.

And that's the problem. The only time wrestlers or promoters take issue with a particular review of their work is when it's negative. If that same overweight, pimple-faced wrestling nerd wrote a glowing account of a wrestler's match on his blog, I doubt that wrestler would be poking fun at him on Facebook.

Wrestling fans witnessed the height of that kind of hypocrisy recently, courtesy of Ring of Honor. For years, ROH has been all too happy to direct fans to rave reviews of its events and matches by wrestling writers. The company even reprinted a *Pro Wrestling Illustrated* blog item I wrote in 2010 praising its creative direction.

But when wrestling writers rightfully took the company to task for once again putting on an Internet pay-per-view filled with technical glitches that kept hundreds of fans from watching, ROH writer Patrick Edwards dismissed them on the company's website as having "an axe to grind," being too "negative," and making their living by "stirring the pot." Now that's nerve.

Accepting criticism can be tough for any creative person, and defense mechanisms are bound to kick in whenever somebody questions the quality of your work. Having helped put together the "PWI 500" for the past six years, I can certainly attest to that. And I wouldn't deny that there are members of the wrestling media who use their platform only to speak ill of wrestling performers and bookers, while never offering words of praise. Those people do a disservice to legitimate wrestling journalists who painstakingly choose each of their words, and are all too happy to give credit when it's due.

But, in the end, the best way for wrestlers or promoters to guard against critics who say their work is bad is to try their hardest to make their work

good. Feedback—both positive and negative—is essential to that effort. And so is a thick skin.

And so I offer them this friendly piece of advice from a writer who has

never laced up a pair of wrestling boots in his life: If you want to get far in this business, don't bother asking fans, "Could you do any better?" Instead, ask yourself: "Can I do any better?" □



PHOTO BY DAN McMILLAN

Senior Writer Al Castle was given a different perspective on the sport when he witnessed Tony Nese (pictured) train wrestlers at the New York Wrestling Connection school on Long Island.

Q & A

TITO SANTANA

"I had a big angel looking out for me"

WITH THE CRY of "Arriba!" and a fist thrust into the air, Tito Santana energized a legion of fans, as they cheered every armdrag, marveled at every dropkick, and popped for every flying forearm. He was a classic babyface for the entirety of his career.

Merced Solis grew up in Mission, Texas, with the goal of becoming a football player. Solis attended West Texas State University in the 1970s, where he was a tight end, playing alongside quarterback Tully Blanchard and defensive tackle Ted DiBiase. His brief NFL stint ended when the Kansas City Chiefs cut him during training camp, so he went on to play for the B.C. Lions in the Canadian Football League for one season. Blanchard finally persuaded Solis to pursue a wrestling career, and, in 1977, Solis accompanied Blanchard to Florida, where both men trained under promoter Eddie Graham.

From there, Solis competed in Texas, the Mid-Atlantic, and Georgia. Solis received his big break in the WWF, where Vince McMahon Sr. gave him the ring name of Tito Santana. He and Ivan Putski defeated Jerry and Johnny Valiant for the WWF World tag team title in New York's Madison Square Garden on October 22, 1979.

Though the two held the belts for six months, McMahon thought Santana needed more seasoning, and the Texas native ventured to the AWA. There he challenged World champion Nick Bockwinkel in a series of matches, but was unable to take his belt. Finally, the time was right, and McMahon asked Santana to return to the WWF. He defeated Magnificent Muraco for the Intercontinental belt at the Boston Garden on February 11, 1984. A knee injury caused Santana to drop the title to Greg Valentine seven months later in London, Ontario. Santana's recapture of the I-C strap—inside of a steel cage in Baltimore on July 6, 1985—came at the peak of his popularity.

After losing the title to Randy Savage in early-1986, Santana refocused on the tag team ranks, forming Strike Force with longtime friend Rick Martel. They defeated The Hart Foundation for the WWF World tag team belts on October 27, 1987, in Syracuse, New York. By 1988, the two were squabbling, with Martel unfairly blaming Santana for their change of fortune. Martel became "The Model" and Santana soon became "El Matador." He finished out his WWF career in 1993 before hitting the Northeast independent circuit full-time.

Today, Tito, 59, is a middle school teacher, and his wife, Leah, operates Santana's Hair Salon in Succasunna, New Jersey.

Fans are invited to visit titosantana.net for the latest information on his bookings and public appearances.

"Countless fans viewed Tito as a role model, but I think he should also serve as a role model for aspiring and current wrestlers," noted Senior Writer Harry Burkett following his 90-minute session with the former I-C champ. "He was a reliable WWF employee for a decade, made a good living for his family, and then successfully transitioned to another career that he finds very rewarding. Santana is a class act."

Q: I'll start by asking you about your current profession. You've been a middle-school Spanish teacher for quite some time. Did you always feel that teaching was your true calling after the wrestling business?

A: I'm about to complete my 15th year as a full-time teacher. It was my late, great coach that really made a difference in my life, that got me interested in sports, and I believe it changed my life. I also believed, that with education, I could make a difference with young people. I think I have already, so it's rewarding for me.

Q: And I suppose all that physical activity with the kids—coaching and so forth—is what keeps you in such good shape.

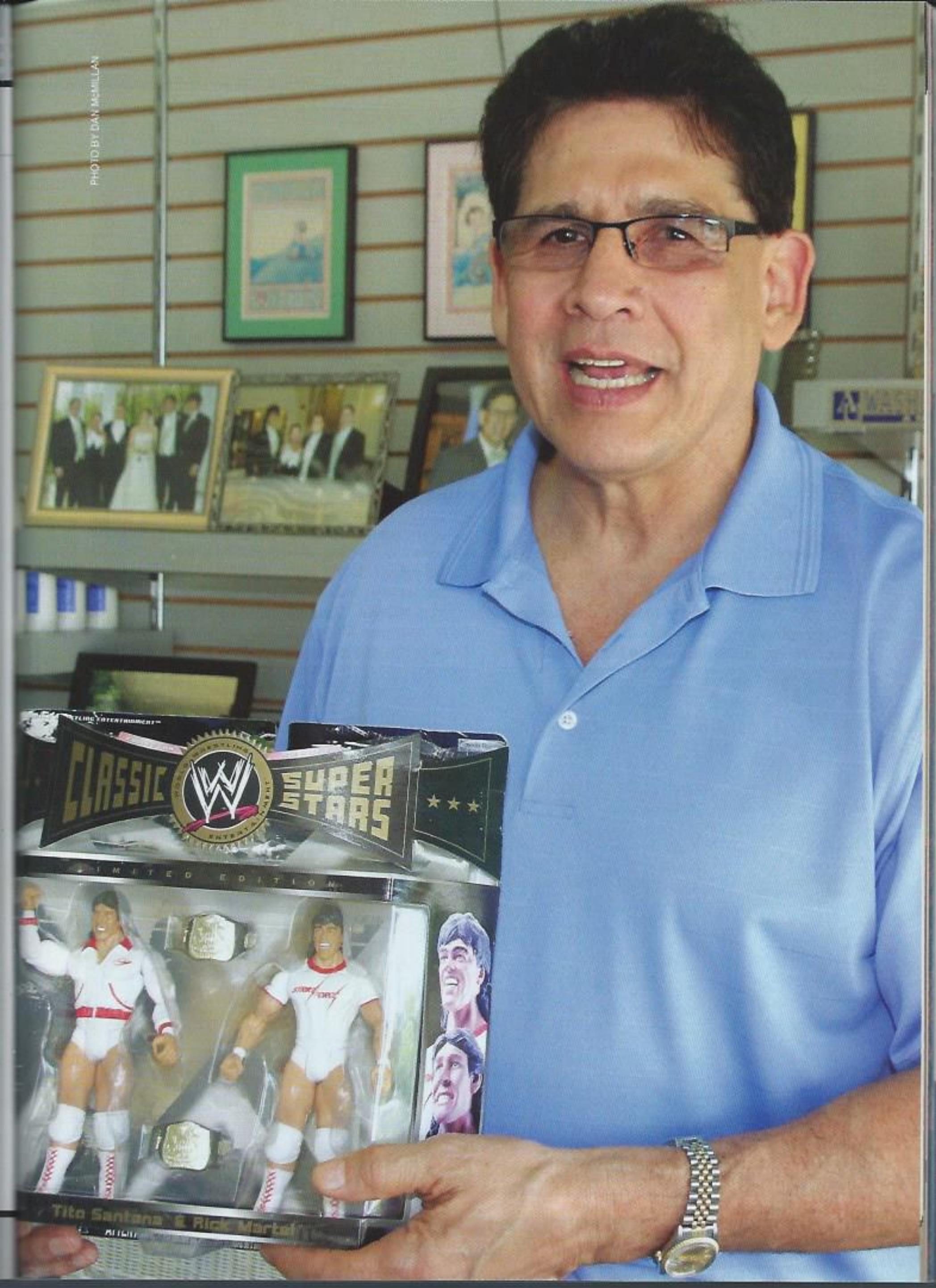
A: I still work out because I still make appearances and get in the ring every once in a while. I have a gym at my house, so I continue to do cardio and lift weights three to four days a week. That keeps me in good shape.

Q: George "The Animal" Steele was a teacher. Baron Von Raschke tried it, but he said it was too difficult because the people running the schools didn't take him seriously, with his look and all. Do you know anyone else from pro wrestling who has become a teacher?

A: I think Chavo Guerrero was a substitute teacher, but he wasn't full-time. I think Honky Tonk was also a substitute teacher for a while.

Q: It seems that, working in a school, you still have that interaction with people. That must have helped your transition.

A: I started out as a substitute teacher for a couple of years because I really wasn't sure if I wanted to do that. But my kids were in school at the time, and I volunteered as a football coach at the freshman level because my oldest



son was a freshman. They knew about my football background, so they were happy to have me.

Q: It also seems that having a good family life helped keep you grounded.

A: Yeah, yeah, my family has always been very important to me, even through all the years of travel. I never wanted to do anything to risk losing my family.

Q: How long have you been married?

A: It was 37 years on June 7.

Q: How many children do you have?

A: I have three boys. None of them wanted to be in wrestling. I asked them when they were little, "Do you guys want to be gone from your kids as much as I'm gone?" I think that left an impression on them. Nobody ever wanted to talk about wrestling. They all got great educations. My oldest son, Matthew, who is 29, is a lawyer. My middle son, Michael, who is 27, graduated from Princeton and he's working in Honduras, helping kids pursue education. My youngest son, Mark, who is 25, works for a tech company in Stamford, Connecticut. He has a master's. They're all very successful.

Q: I understand that your wife operates a hair salon. Is that true?

A: Yeah. We own Santana's Hair Salon, going on our 16th year.

Q: I trust there's at least one picture of you in there from your wrestling days.

A: She gave me a little corner, so I have three or four pictures she let me hang there.

Q: The Tito shrine! Maybe you can clear something up.

Tito clowning around with hair stylist Connie Leahy at Santana's Hair Salon, a thriving business run by his wife of 37 years, Leah.

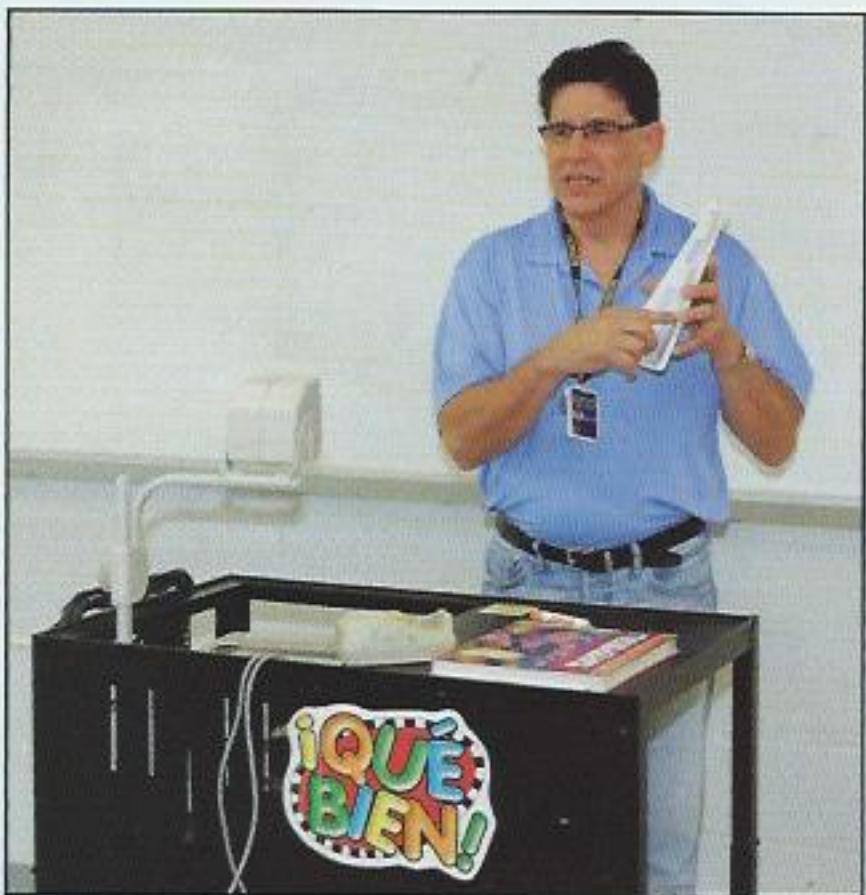


PHOTO BY DAN McMILLAN

Tito Santana, better known to his students as Senor Solis, teaches Spanish at Eisenhower Middle School in New Jersey. He's gratified to be doing something that impacts the lives of young people.

You were billed as being from Tocula, Mexico, when you were in the WWF, but you were billed as being from Mission, Texas, earlier in your career. Were you actually from Mission, Texas?

A: I was born and raised in Mission.



PHOTO BY DAN McMILLAN

"I have three boys. None of them wanted to be in wrestling. I asked them when they were little, 'Do you guys want to be gone from your kids as much as I'm gone?' I think that left an impression on them."

Q: Do you still have family there?

A: All my mother's relatives are from there. When I was a sophomore in high school, my immediate family—including my brother and two sisters—moved to Lake Jackson, and my brother and both brothers-in-law worked for Dow Chemical Plant there in Lake Jackson. But I still spent more time in Mission because most of my relatives and friends were down there.

Q: Did you ever get a chance to see Tocula?

A: No. Vince Sr. told me to pick a town in Mexico and I just grabbed a map. It was actually Toluca, Mexico, and Howard Finkel had a hard time pronouncing "Toluca," so he kept saying "Tocula." Finally, I gave up and said, "Okay, it's Tocula."

Q: All these years later, he's made me feel like a real fool, because I thought it was a real town! So where did you attend high school?

A: Right there at Mission High School.

Q: What sports did you play?

A: I played football, basketball, and I did a little bit of track. I



INTERVIEW PHOTOS BY DAN McMILLAN

was a high jumper, and, in my senior year, I was a sprinter. I didn't have a lot of speed, but I did it to improve my speed for football. I was a bigger guy running the 100-yard dash—all the others were little guys—and I think I came in next to last one time, and the rest of the times I came in



Santana was led to the business by Tully Blanchard and Ted DiBiase, with whom he played football at West Texas State. Tito certainly knows DiBiase well enough to make sure the ref examines his glove before their 1983 match.



Santana would have mixed feelings about a tag team comprised of Ole Anderson and Stan Hansen. Hansen, one of his college football coaches, is a man he holds in high regard. Anderson, who booked matches in Atlanta, "is the only guy in the business that I have nothing good to say about."

last. But it did improve my speed.

Q: When did you really begin to excel at football?

A: When I got to college. While I was in high school, I was a running back and strong safety. In college, they put me at



Santana and Andre the Giant forged a close relationship, which opened the doors to many opportunities for the former gridiron star.

tight end. I think I was fifth-string tight end in my freshman year. I was glad I got the scholarship, but I had no expectations. When I was a sophomore, I beat out a senior to become a starter.

Q: I've interviewed many of the guys from those West Texas days because, of course, so many became wrestlers. Stan Hansen told me that he coached you in your freshman year. Do you remember that?

A: Yeah, he was a tight end coach, as a matter of fact. Big Stan, he was in great shape. He had just come back from the Baltimore Colts. He was tough.

Q: I assume Ted DiBiase and Tully Blanchard were the only ones who were on the team at the same time you were.

A: Yeah.

Q: The three of you had no way of knowing that you would go on to have careers in the same industry, but did you guys have any special chemistry during that time?

A: I wasn't a wrestling fan whatsoever. DiBiase's stepfather was a professional wrestler. Tully Blanchard, his father was a promoter in San Antonio. So they knew what they were going to be doing. Tully started talking to me about getting into professional wrestling during my junior year. I told him that my first love was football. It wasn't until I went to Kansas City, and realized how tough professional football was, that I told him I wanted to give it a shot if the invitation was still open. But then I said I wanted to give football a shot for one year and I went to Canada and played for the B.C. Lions.

Q: How long were you actually with the Chiefs?

A: I was there for only 10 weeks and then I got cut. Instead of going back home, I went back to my coach at West Texas State, who had connections with the B.C. Lions, and he made a phone call and hooked me up with a tryout. During my tryout, I had to go one-on-one against a guy who got cut from the Minnesota Vikings. We put on the pads and I knocked him on his butt a couple of times, and they sent him home and kept me. I spent the rest of the season, and then came back the following season and played a full year. My intention was

to only do wrestling during the off-season and then go back to play football because I had just signed my third one-year contract. I just didn't go back.

Q: So Tully lured you into the wrestling business. Who actually helped you break in?

A: I started working out with Tully in the ring in San Antonio, and then started refereeing there. We were waiting for Tully's graduation, and then, in January 1977, Tully and I went to Florida Championship Wrestling with Eddie Graham. Hiro Matsuda helped train me.

Q: He didn't try to break your leg, did he? He had quite a reputation. Did you get along well in the "snakepit"?

"Vince Sr. told me to pick a town in Mexico and I just grabbed a map. It was actually Toluca, Mexico, and Howard Finkel had a hard time pronouncing 'Toluca,' ... Finally, I gave up and said, 'Okay, it's Tocula.'"

A: Terry Funk was the NWA World champion, and he put in a word for me. And I knew Tully, of course. I was an athlete and they knew I was serious, so they took it easy on me.

Q: Did you get a chance to train with the Funks at all?

A: No, but I knew Terry pretty well from college because he used to come to the games.

Q: Did you see anybody in wrestling that really inspired you?

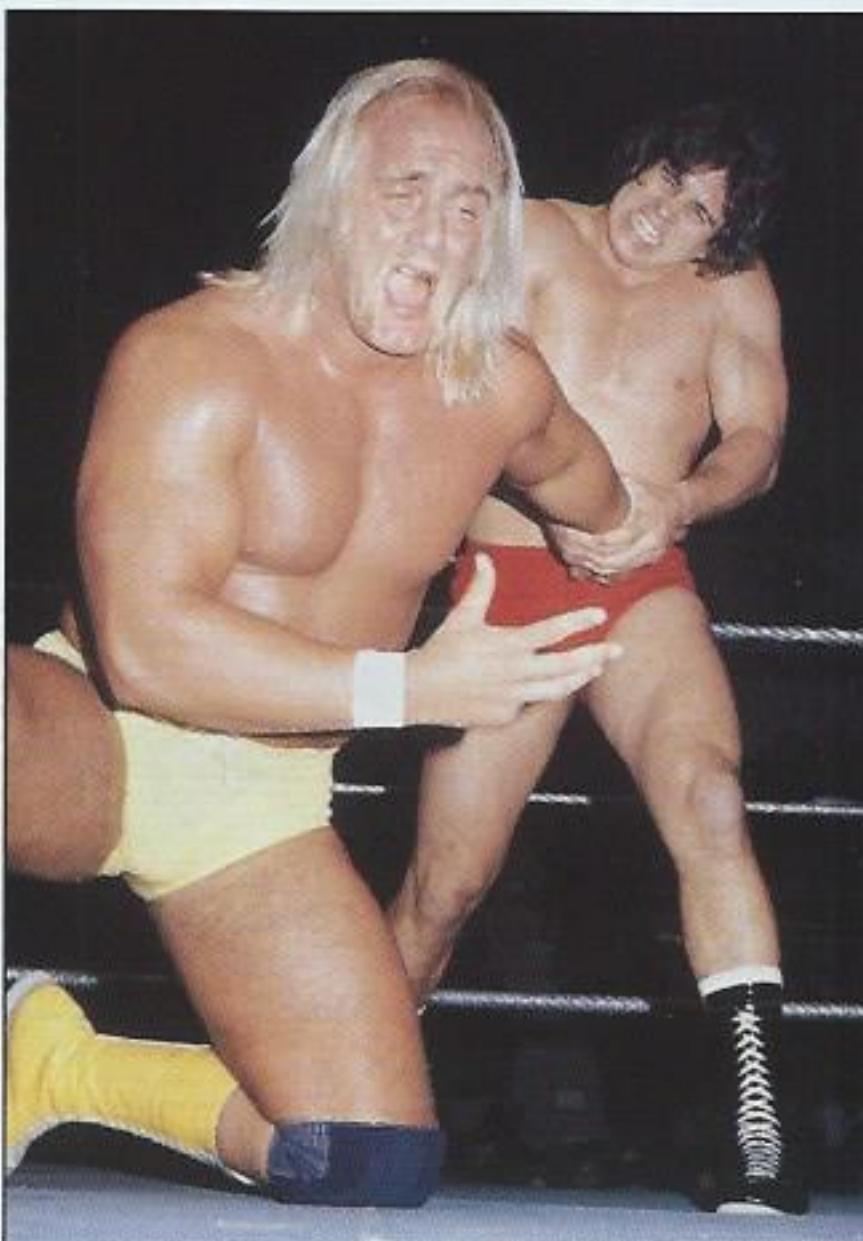
A: We had so many great workers when I first started out in Florida. I used to love to watch Jack Brisco, Steve Keirn, and Dick Slater. I just thought those guys were amazing, the way they used to control the fans. From my perspective, they were fantastic performers. I thought I'd never learn how to work like those guys. I had to learn how to crawl before I started walking. I really humbled myself and I took everybody's advice. To ask veterans to watch me, when I was going to be competing for their jobs, wasn't easy. I was really humbled that guys would do that, critique my matches.

Q: While you were in Florida, Atlanta, and Charlotte, was New York your goal?

A: No, I had no idea. I wasn't a wrestling fan, so I had no idea about territories ... I didn't know anything about the business. I just learned as I went along. I don't know if you're aware of this, but Dick Murdoch and Blackjack Mulligan bought Amarillo from the Funks, and they brought me into Texas, but it didn't work out too good for me there. It's pretty hard when the boss is the babyface and he doesn't want anybody to get over. There, I met Mario Savoldi. Mario Savoldi is the father of Angelo Savoldi. Mario was helping in Texas, he was the referee, and he was doing some promotional work. Andre the Giant was there, too, and he and Mario were the ones who started talking to me about New York. Mario kept telling me, "If you can make it in New York, in Madison Square Garden, you can make it anywhere." Thank God Andre the Giant liked me. He took a film from there and showed it to Vince Sr. DiBiase was already going to New York because he wasn't happy either, with Murdoch as the boss.

Q: When did you start using the name Tito Santana? Who came up with that name?

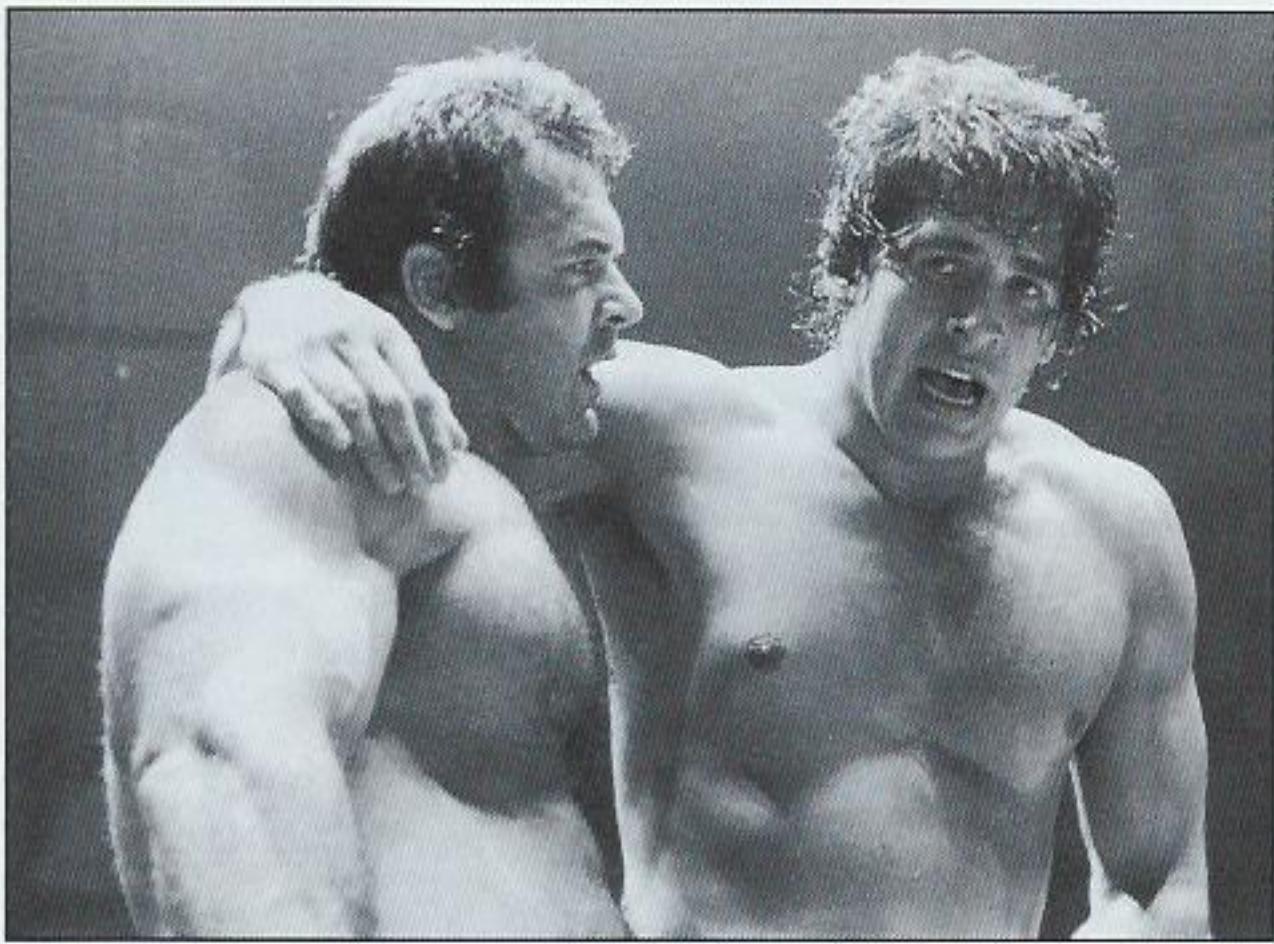
A: I started out in Florida as Merced Solis, and then I was Richard Blood (Rick Steamboat's real name) for two years in Atlanta and Charlotte. When I got to New York, Vince Sr. told me he wanted me to think of a name, and I always liked the name Santana. At my first TV taping, he said, "We're going to call you 'Tino.'" I went in for that first match and they intro-



Santana and Hulk Hogan were two young pups in 1980 that were extremely promising, but not quite ready for the bright lights of New York.

duced me as "Tino Santana." And then, when I came back through the curtains, Vince Sr. and Vince Jr. were standing there. Vince Sr. told me, "From now on, you're going to be *Tito Santana*." I said, "Okay, that's all right with me."

Q: When you first got there, it had to be a comfort to have



Nobody expected much when young Tito and veteran star Ivan Putski formed a tag team (above), least of all Johnny and Jerry Valiant, who found out quickly how talented Santana was (below).



someone like Ted DiBiase in the lockerroom, somebody dating back to your college days.

A: Yeah, as a matter of fact, we rode up together from Texas.

Q: Really?

A: Yeah, we followed each other. I had my car, he had his car, he brought his wife, and we lived in the same town. We'd take his car, and I let his wife keep my car. My apartment had a washer and dryer, and, when I was gone, she would come over and do their laundry. We became friends.

Q: I'm thinking about how quickly you reached the pinnacle. You're working hard for these territories, and, suddenly, in

1979, you win the World tag team title in Madison Square Garden. What was that like?

A: After I got my degree in college and pursued wrestling, I said to myself, if I'm not making good money by the end of five years, I'll just find something else to do. I had a big angel looking out for me, named Andre the Giant, that helped me get into New York—and that made my career. I was very lucky and I was always very humble. After I got a bigger car, I always volunteered to drive Andre around. Then we became good friends. When they told me they were going to team me with Ivan Putski and put the belts on us, I couldn't believe it. Ivan

Putski was a known wrestler; he was established. We became the World champions all of a sudden, got all kinds of notoriety in the magazines, and even became known in Japan.

Q: How did you get along with Ivan Putski? How did he treat you, with you being a newcomer?

A: I think they asked him first. He volunteered because he was a Texas guy and I was a Texas guy. He was a football player and I was a football player. I didn't hang out with him outside the ring. It's not like we were out drinking beers together. But in the ring, I knew my position. He was the guy who was established, I was the young guy with the energy, and it was easy to get sympathy on me, and then Ivan Putski would come in and clean house. I didn't have any ego. I wasn't worried about being the one getting beat up all the time. He helped me a lot, considering that I never thought he was a good worker in the ring, at least for my style of wrestling. But he had his own gimmick, and he worked his gimmick pretty good.

Q: When did you first wrestle for the AWA? Was it before or after that time?

A: I was in New York for about a year. Ivan Putski and I dropped the belts to The Samoans. Vince Sr. said to me, "You've got a lot of potential. Now you can stay here if you want, but, if you stay here, I'll have to start beating you. I really don't want to do that because I'd rather you go somewhere else and get some experience and come back when you're ready." I said, "I'll do whatever you want me to do." He said, "Well, my suggestion is for you to go somewhere else. Where do you want to go?" I'd heard Minnesota was a good place to go to, and, at the time, Mexicans were doing good in Texas. But he booked me in Minnesota, and it was a great move for me because there

"I had to learn how to crawl before I started walking. I really humbled myself and I took everybody's advice. To ask veterans to watch me, when I was going to be competing for their jobs, wasn't easy."

was a lot of talent there and I was able to learn how to do my interviews. Baron Von Raschke, The Crusher, Mad Dog Vachon, Dino Bravo, and Ken Patera were there.

Q: Of course, one of your trademarks was "Arriba!" at the end of your promos. When did you start doing that? How did that come about?

A: I had lived with Dino Bravo when I worked out of Georgia in 1977, and I ran into him again when I went to Minnesota. Dino took me aside and he said, "You need to start coming up with a phrase, something catchy at the end. You need to start showing a little bit of fire. Maybe get into your Spanish, raise your wrist high up in the air, and just holler 'Arriba!' It was Dino's idea.

Q: I remember that series of matches you had against Nick Bockwinkel. In fact, in our archives, we have some great black-and-white pictures of you wrestling Bockwinkel, I think in December of 1981. What was it like to wrestle him?

A: Nick Bockwinkel was my type of wrestler. He was about the same size as me and he was a great competitor. He was quite a bit older than I was, but he had a lot of pride and he was a fantastic worker. Whenever I had a chance to step in the ring with any of those guys, I just kind of followed. When you're a woman dancing with a man, it's the man that leads the dance. I guess I was the woman, just following. I was a pretty good follower and listened to all the advice they would give me. I had my first hour broadway, where we went to an hour draw, with Nick Bockwinkel. As a matter of fact, it was in Denver, Colorado. Talk about being a mile high. The only reason that I survived was because I was in such great shape.

Q: Did you return to New York immediately after leaving Minnesota?

A: No, I went back to Atlanta because Ole Anderson was the booker and Jim Barnett was the owner, producing the TV show for Ted Turner, and they promised to make me this big international star. When I got there, Ole gave me the runaround and didn't do right by me and didn't keep his promises. He promised a guarantee and then took away my guarantee. My wife had just given birth to our oldest son and I had just bought a condominium. Ole was trying to push me to Louisiana, and Paul Orndorff, who was my best friend in the business, told me that Louisiana was tough traveling.

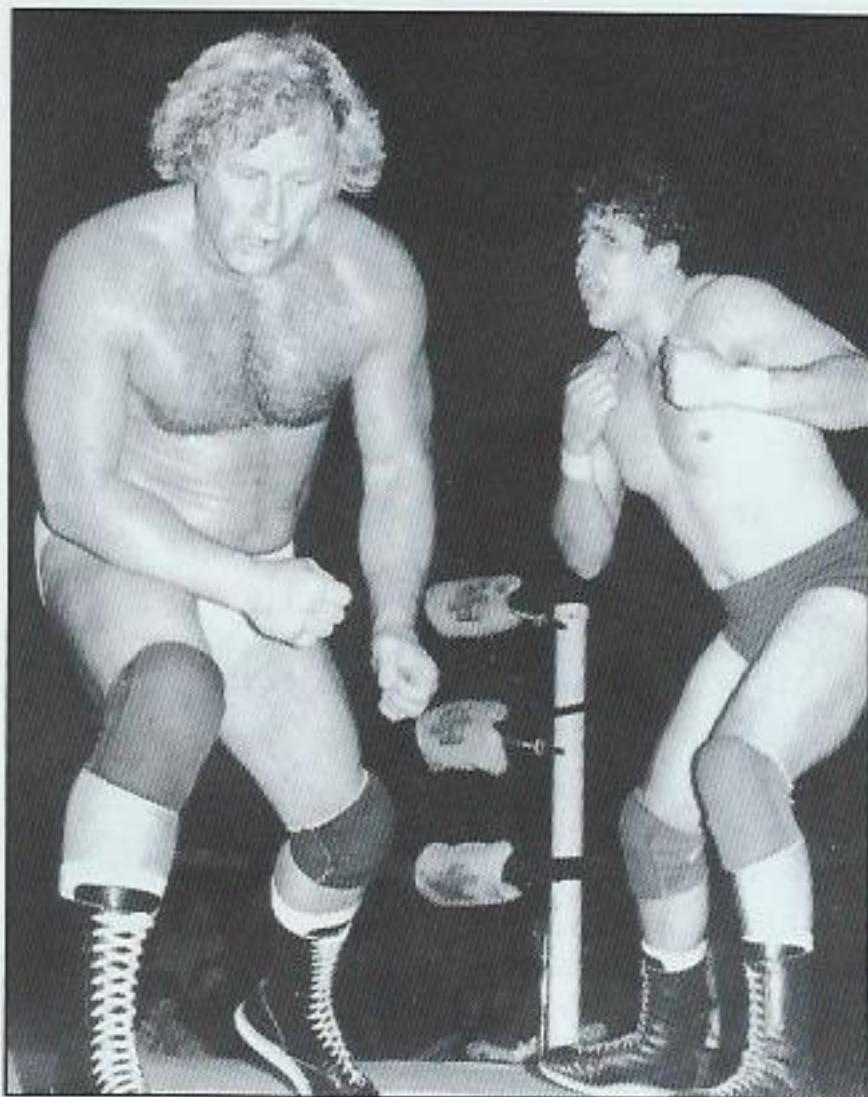
Q: I suppose, geographically, it was the biggest territory.



A: So I called Vince Sr., and it turned out that I would call Vince before every move I made from then on, and said, "I'm going to have to make a move because Ole is treating me like s--- here. I think Bill Watts wants me." He said, "Yeah, Bill Watts is a good man." This was on a Tuesday, and I was set to talk to Bill Watts in Houston on Friday. When I got to Houston, Ernie Ladd told me, "You've got the biggest decision of your life to make tonight, son." I said, "What are you talking about?" He said, "Vince McMahon wants you to call him in the morning. He wants you really bad. And Bill Watts wants you bad here. Whatever you do, don't tell him I'm talking to you right now." When Bill Watts entered the lockerroom, he came to me and said, "You're a heckuva talent,



After leaving the WWF, Santana moved on to AWA to gain more experience against men like Jerry Blackwell. It was Dino Bravo (background) who suggested Tito's "Arriba!" cry.



Santana was unable to beat Hall of Famer Nick Bockwinkel for the AWA World title, but he did wrestle him to a one-hour draw, which is quite an accomplishment.

Santana was brought back to the WWF to bolster the babyface roster at a time when the company could not depend on Jimmy Snuka. Snuka, Santana notes, was every bit as popular at the time as Hulk Hogan would ever be.

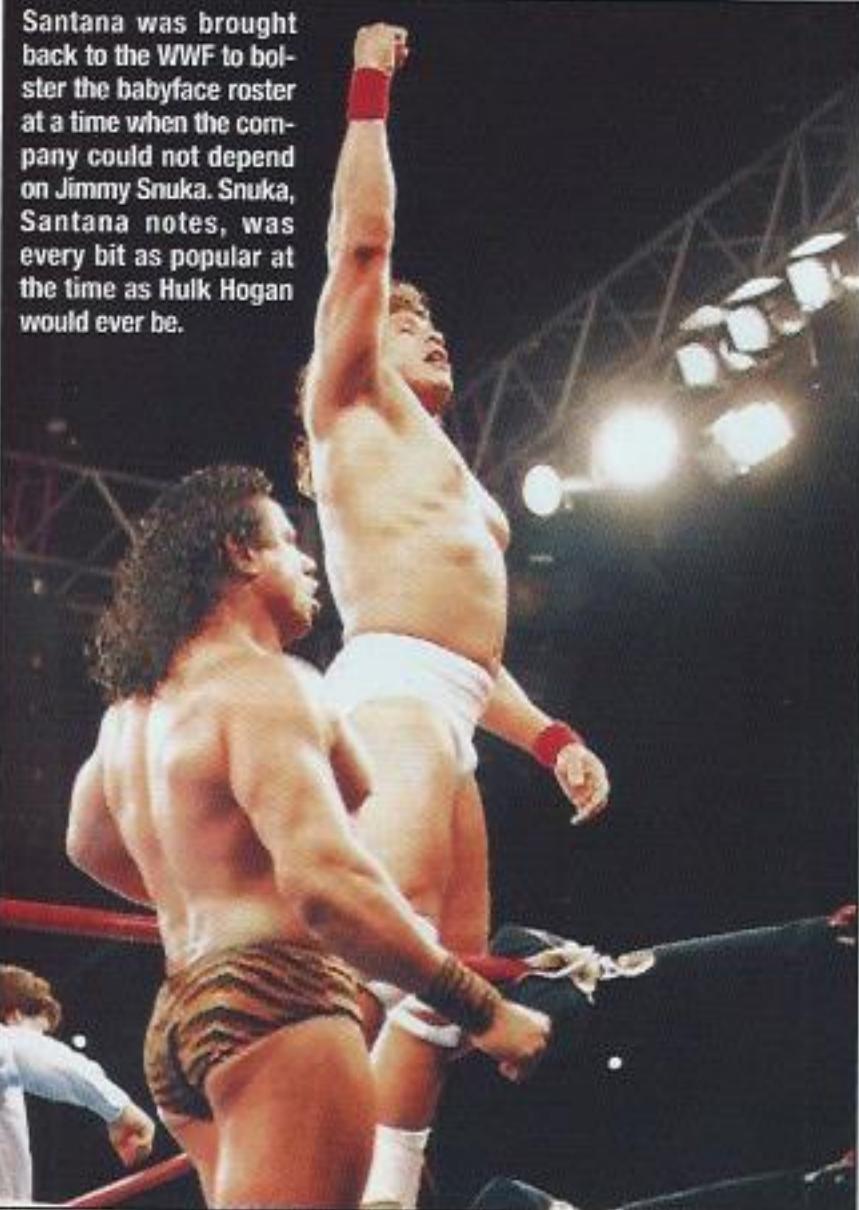


PHOTO BY KOICHI YOSHIZAWA

but you need to get polished. I'd like to keep you here and then you can go to New York. You'll be polished and work on top wherever you go." I said I'd have to call Vince.

I called Vince in the morning. It was weird. I thought he wanted me real bad, so I thought he'd be asking me to come and making all these offers, but he didn't bring it up. And then I'm here getting pissed off on the other side of the phone and finally I said, "Look, Ole Anderson and Bill Watts were working an angle against me. They took my contract away from me in Atlanta to make me want to go to Louisiana. So I've just gone through a period of a month-and-a-half, two months where they're destroying me in Atlanta to make me want to go to Louisiana." I was wondering if Vince was in on the whole thing. I said, "The reason I'm calling you is because I was told to call you." And I'll never forget it. He said, "Yep, your starting day is May 10. You're going to do TV on May 10 and 11, and then, in three weeks, you'll come back and do TV again for two more days. And in three more weeks, you'll come back and you'll start the territory." I'll never forget that date because May 10 was my birthday, 1983.

Q: Did you seriously think that he might have been behind the whole deal of switching you from one territory to another?

A: No, no, he wasn't with them. As I wrote in my book (*Tito Santana's Tales From The Ring*, Sports Publishing, LLC, 2008), Ole burned a lot of people. Ole is the only guy in the business that I have nothing good to say about.

Q: So when you went to New York, did they put you on the fast track to feud with Don Muraco right away?

A: No. I don't know if you remember, Jimmy Snuka was having all kinds of problems, he wasn't making shows. Vince was pretty upset with Jimmy, and that's when they decided ... I had no idea they were going to put the belt on me. Mr. Fuji was the one that told me that they had pretty good plans for me.

Q: What kind of wrestler was Muraco? What were his strengths in the ring?

A: He was a great heel and a great interview. God, when I got here, him and Jimmy were selling out everywhere. Jimmy Snuka was over like a million dollars ... I don't know if you remember that. He'd just had the feud with Ray Stevens. I believe Jimmy was over as good or better than Hulk Hogan, and that was without all the push that Hogan got.

Q: I agree. People often think of Hogan as the first big star of the 1980s, but, if you were watching in late-1982, early-'83, Snuka was as popular as Hogan would become.

A: Oh, yeah, everywhere we went, they were turning people away. He had some problems. Lots of times, the problems we had were because of how hard we used to work. A lot of the guys who got addicted to drugs were addicted to painkillers first because we were always on the road, we were working hard, and we were working hurt. Doctors were giving us pain pills. A lot of the guys became addicted to pain pills, and then they needed downers to sleep and uppers to get up. We were trying to survive on the road and keep on working because we had to

"A lot of the guys became addicted to pain pills, and then they needed downers to sleep and uppers to get up. We were trying to survive on the road and keep on working because we had to work to make money."

work to make money. I have to believe that nobody's to blame but the road and the schedule we were trying to keep.

Q: Speaking of injuries, I suppose it was your legitimate knee injury that led to probably the biggest feud of your career, with Greg Valentine. What was the nature of your knee injury that you needed time off?

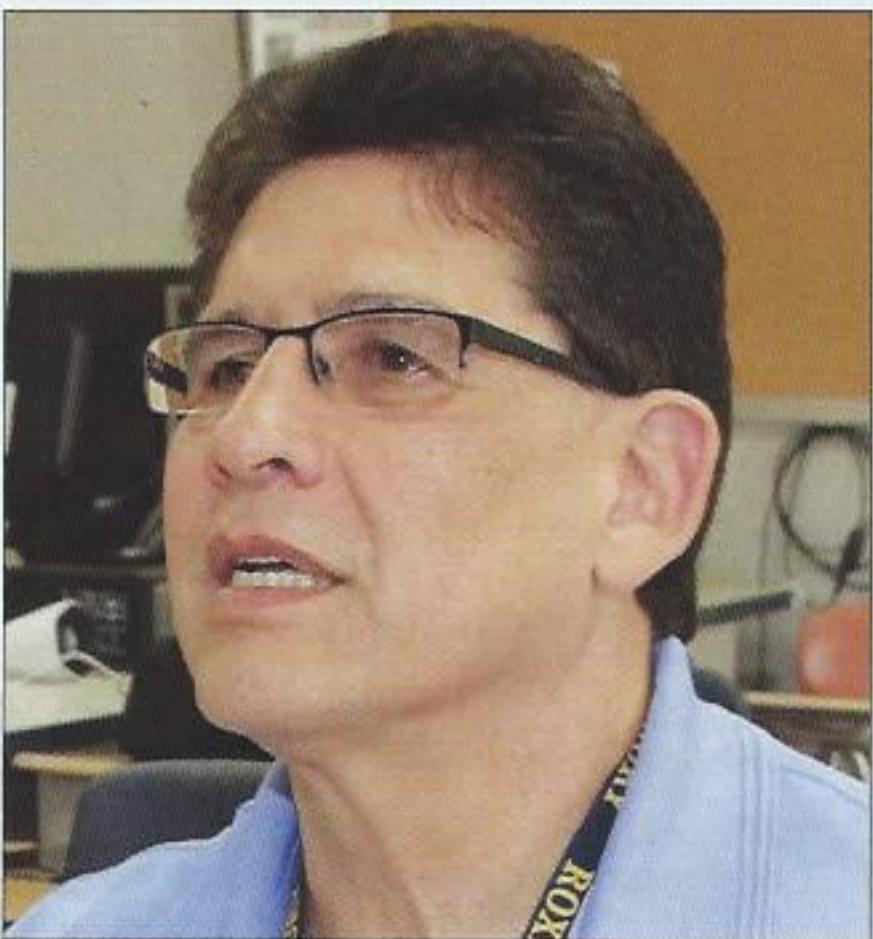
A: I had arthroscopic surgery. "Mr. Wonderful" Paul Orndorff and I had wrestled two nights before. We were in Erie, Pennsylvania, and he caught my leg. I was on my belly, and my cartilage popped. Andre had to help me to my room. The next day, we were on our way to do a TV taping in Ontario. I had to go on crutches, and I told Vince Jr. that my knee was gone. I said I was going to have surgery, but I could do an angle that night. So I taped up my knee and put a brace around it. They decided to do the angle with me and Greg Valentine. George Scott liked Greg Valentine, so they did the angle with me and Greg. They showed the surgery on TV. It was legitimate.

Q: Valentine was perfect because that played into his persona anyway. He broke Jay Strongbow's leg, he broke Wahoo McDaniel's leg, and here he broke Tito's leg.

A: Right, yeah, people bought it. That helped me get over big time.

Q: I interviewed Greg Valentine a while back. He described you as a person who was very respectful and willing to learn. He said, "I could hit him hard and he'd never complain, he could hit me hard and I'd never complain. It was a dogfight every night, but we didn't just chop meat, we actually did wrestle." What kind of relationship did you have with him?

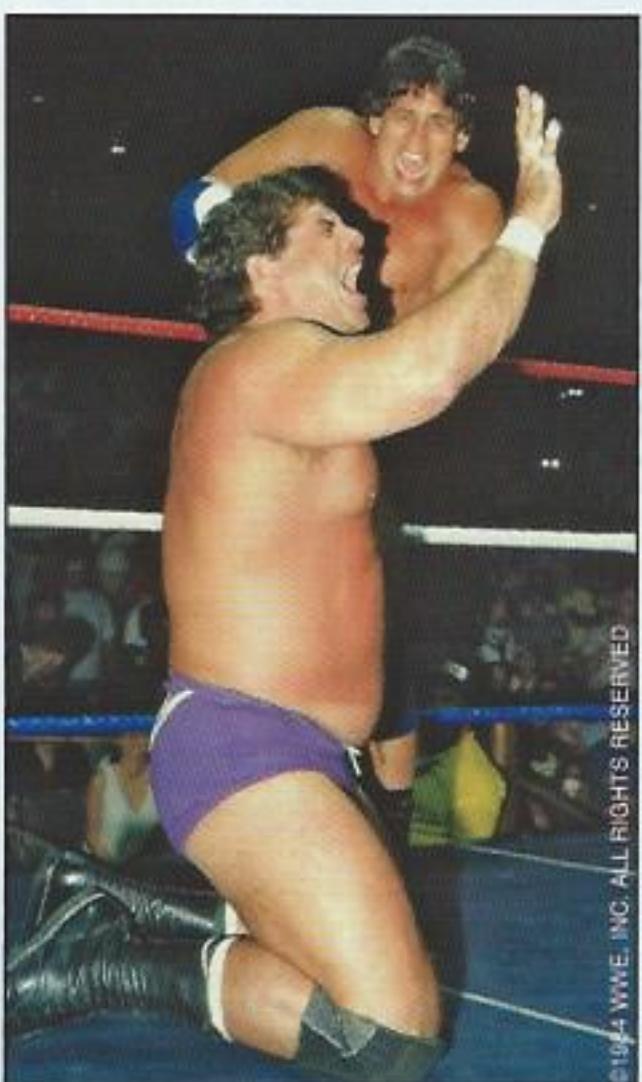
A: I had a good relationship with him. I used to come home and tell my wife, "God, I've had easier street-fights than the matches I've had with Greg." But Greg was all about this business. He knew what we had to do to get the match over. And he had a lot more experience than I did, so I learned from him also. He was the leader. He's a great guy.



Q: That was probably one of the best feuds for the Intercontinental title, one of the most meaningful feuds I can remember. I think there were some tears in the crowd when Valentine destroyed the Intercontinental belt. Remember that in the cage in Baltimore?

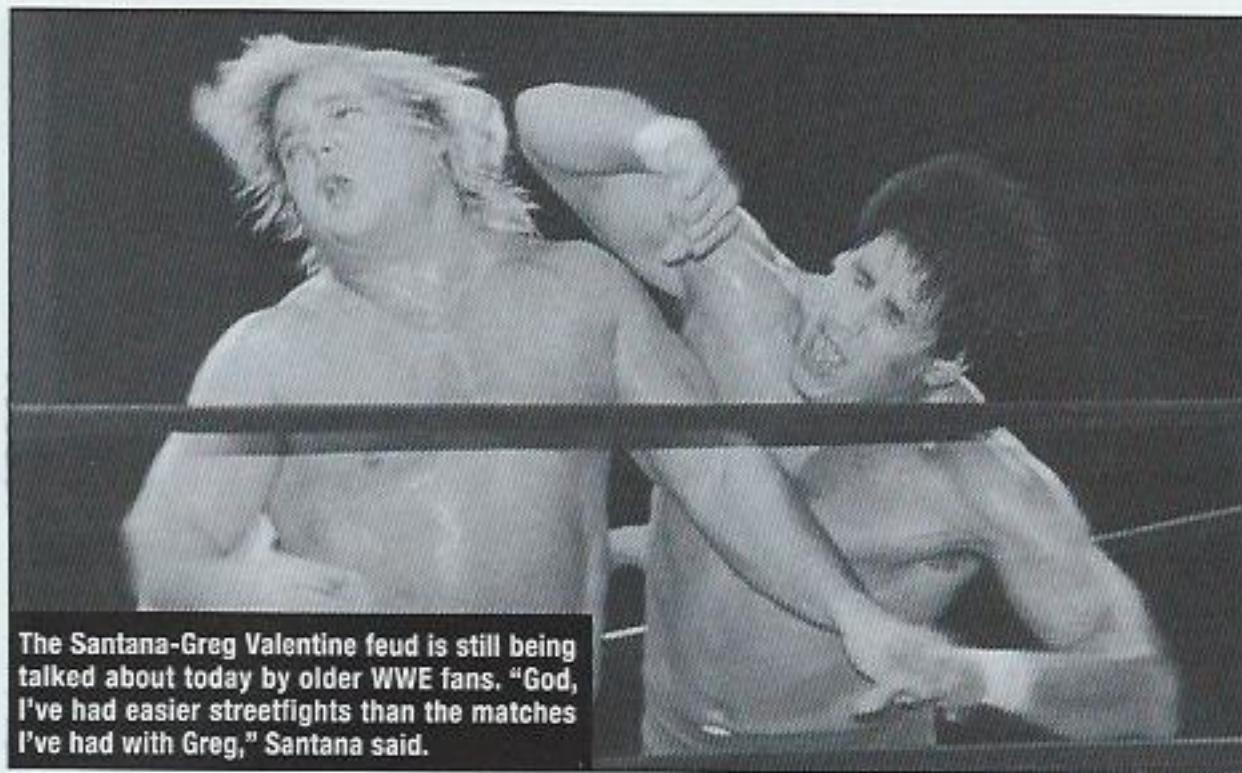


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Tito began his first of two Intercontinental title reigns (left) by beating Don Muraco on February 11, 1984, in Boston (right).



The Santana-Greg Valentine feud is still being talked about today by older WWE fans. "God, I've had easier streetfights than the matches I've had with Greg," Santana said.

A: Yeah, I got to keep that belt. I had it in my basement and I ended up throwing it away because I thought it was just wasted metal. I could kick myself in the hiney now, because so many people have made me offers for that belt. I threw it in the garbage.

Q: Greg said the same thing, that he wishes he had snatched the belt up that night. You were quite a high-flyer. I especially remember your dropkicks. Could anybody get up as high as you, or did anybody come close?

A: I never liked to compare my dropkick with anybody else's dropkicks, because we all have our own egos, and I never liked to say that I had the best dropkick. A lot of people have told me that I had the best dropkick. I know "Jumpin'" Jim Brunzell could get up and dropkick pretty high. There were so many great workers back then, if you remember, and there were a lot of people who could dropkick. What made mine look good is that I would keep my feet together and pop it in their face.

Q: Yeah, a little more snap. The flying forearm, that wasn't your regular finisher when you first came to New York, was it? That came a little bit later, right?

A: I tried different things. I would jump up in a flying headscissors, roll over, grab the ankle, and get a guy in a small package. Then there was another one, almost like a figure-four, but on the opposite leg. My opponent would be on his back and I would spin and then my back would fall toward his head.

Q: Like an Indian deathlock, correct?

A: That's right. But when I would go

A: Yeah, sometimes I would beat somebody without even making a comeback. Out of nowhere, I'd catch them with a flying forearm and beat them.

Q: My memory is a little fuzzy on this: I remember something about a Flying Burrito. Was that the same move?

A: That's what Bobby Heenan would call the flying forearm: the Flying Burrito.

Q: Okay, I knew it wasn't the official name. What do you think of that stuff back then? There was so much stereotyping in wrestling. You had the Flying Burrito. I suppose if Rick Martel did the same move, it would've been called the Flying French Fry.

A: At the time, Jesse the Body would call me Chico.

Q: Yeah, Chico Santana.

A: Those guys were over so good that whenever they would

back, I was knocking the hell out of my head, so I stopped doing that. Then I remembered that Ivan Putski would stand and chop.

Q: You mean the ol' Polish Hammer.

A: The Hammer, yeah. So I started throwing a flying hammer. I don't even know how I came up with the flying forearm. I tried the flying forearm, and I could get up in the air pretty good. The very first time I did it, I was told it looked good.

Q: It was exciting because it didn't require any setup. You could come up with that move at any time during the match.



The WWF and Santana gave fans the most up-close and personal moment imaginable by televising Tito's arthroscopic knee surgery. According to the storyline, it was Valentine who inflicted the damage; in reality, it was Paul Orndorff.

"I saw so many guys make the transition from babyface to heel. I figured, by that time, I was a good enough worker to make the transition, and I wanted to give it a shot."

.....

downgrade you or get on your case, they actually helped you get over. You'd get sympathy from the crowd.

Q: Heenan talking about all your relatives piling into the same car.

A: Bobby said that when he first met Tito Santana down in Mexico that he and all his family lived in a '56 Chevy. Bobby had some great stories.

Q: Rick Martel praised you very highly during our previous interview with him. At the time you and Rick formed Strike Force, he was coming off a rocky time with Tom Zenk. He told me how much he appreciated having a steady and stable partner.

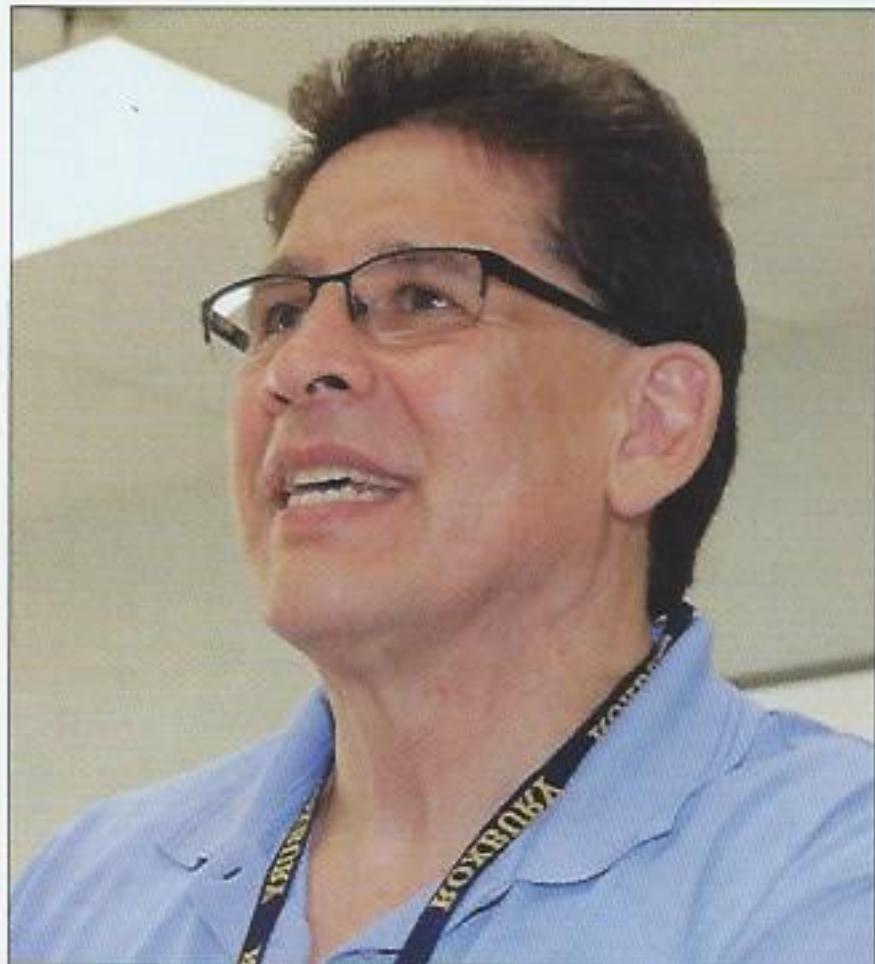
A: I feel the same way about him. We spent more time together than we did with our wives. His family was important, and so was mine. We didn't follow the lead of guys who were partying like it was never going to end. It was a good time of my life.

Q: Who eventually came up with the name Strike Force?

A: First they were going to call us The Border Patrol because I'm from South Texas and he's from the North. I don't know if you remember this from the middle-'80s, but Hispanics from all over Latin America would cross the border to get into this country. About a week before, there had been a whole bunch of Mexicans that were found dead in a railroad car. I told Vince, "You can do what you want, but Border Patrol would be more like a heel name for us. If you're going to make us babyfaces, then we might need another name. Then they came up with Strike Force."



Santana was able to take to the air once again following surgery. Tito thinks he and Jim Brunzell had the best dropkicks in the business.



Santana holds a cherished place in WrestleMania history, having defeated The Executioner in the very first match of WrestleMania 1.

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Santana and Rick Martel defeated The Hart Foundation for the WWF tag team belts in October 1987 (above). Their simultaneous dropkicks against Tito's old friend Tully Blanchard and Arn Anderson was a highlight moment at WrestleMania 5 in 1989 (below).

Q: Sounded like a Chuck Norris movie. Martel took time off after you lost the World tag team title to Demolition. What did you do during that time?

A: Pretty much, that was the end of Tito Santana. They said we had to drop the belts because Rick had to take time off, and that I shouldn't worry because there were so many things they could do with me. But they really didn't do anything with me, other than have me put people over.

Q: When was the decision made that Rick was going to turn heel, effectively ending Strike Force?

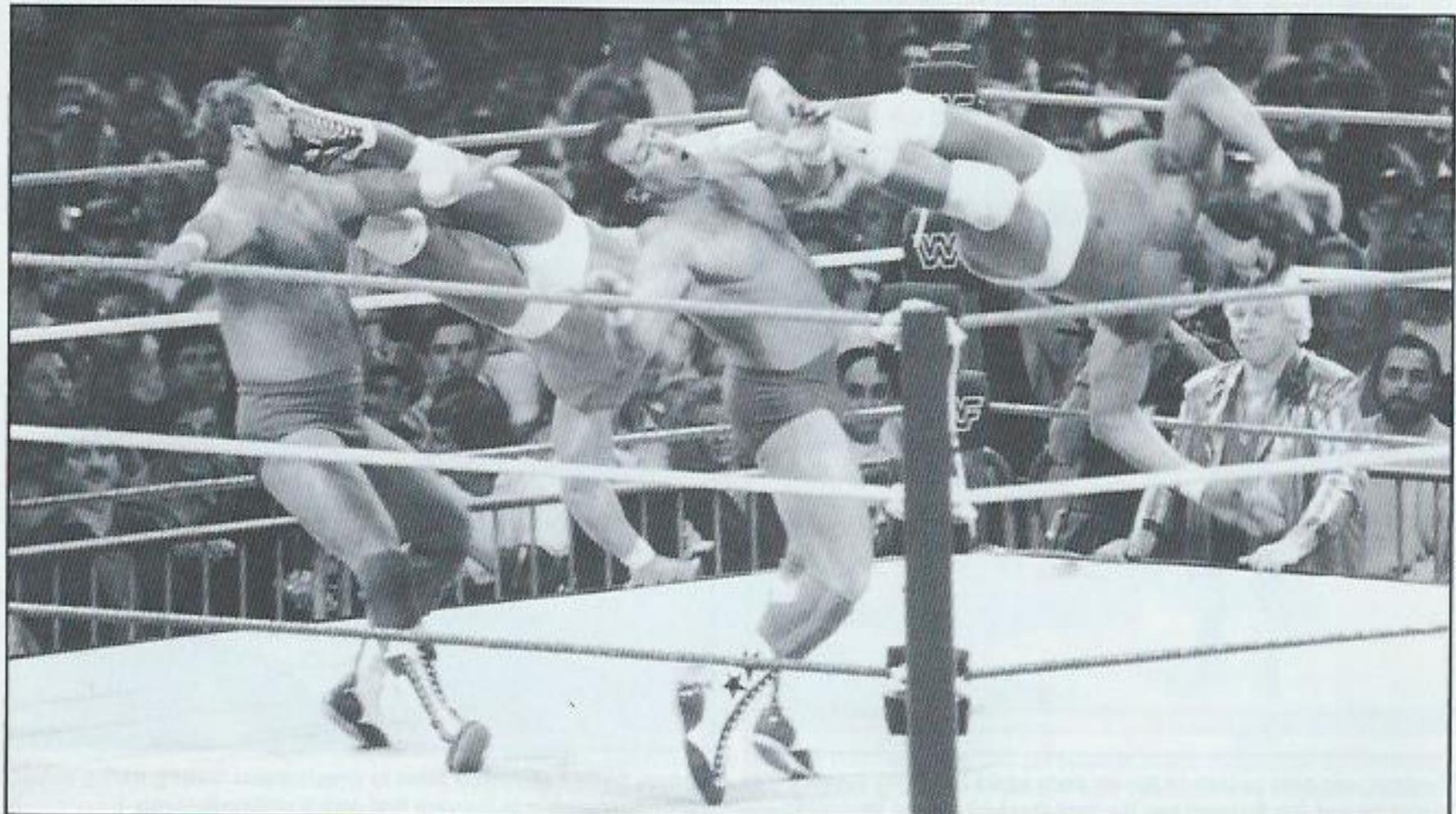
A: By the time Rick came back, they already had the gimmick as "The Model" all lined up, and Rick ended up doing a great job with it. I had gone to Vince and said, "Vince, I'd like to be the heel. I'd like you to turn me heel against Rick." And he said, "No, Rick's going to be the heel. You're going to stay the baby." Later on, Vince came up with the idea of El Matador, so I thought I would get another big break, but it didn't happen.

Q: Did you appreciate El Matador? Did you look forward to doing that?

A: I looked forward to doing it because they sent me to Mexico to learn how to bullfight.

Q: Really? I'm impressed!

A: The vignettes came out pretty good. I was supposed to come out with a big angle with the "Million-Dollar Man" Ted DiBiase. This was like '92, '93. The "Million-Dollar Man" ended up doing an angle with George Steele. I was in the main event in Barcelona, Spain, wrestling against The Undertaker and the place was completely sold out. I think at that time they planned to expand into Spain and South America, and they were thinking about even making me the champion. I didn't hear that directly from anybody, but it was the way they were building things.



"I wasn't happy on the road. I could make a pretty good living and just work on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays, and not be on the road anymore. I did that for a couple of years, which was really nice."

Q: As they did with Alberto Del Rio recently, for the same reason.

A: They decided not to go to Spain, Mexico, and South America, and that was the end of Tito Santana. I called the merchandising department. I wanted to know how they were going to merchandise El Matador. They didn't have any merchandise planned. I told my wife that if they weren't going to do anything with me, then I should hang it up.

Q: I guess that might be what held you back at that stage of your career, the fact that you never did turn heel.

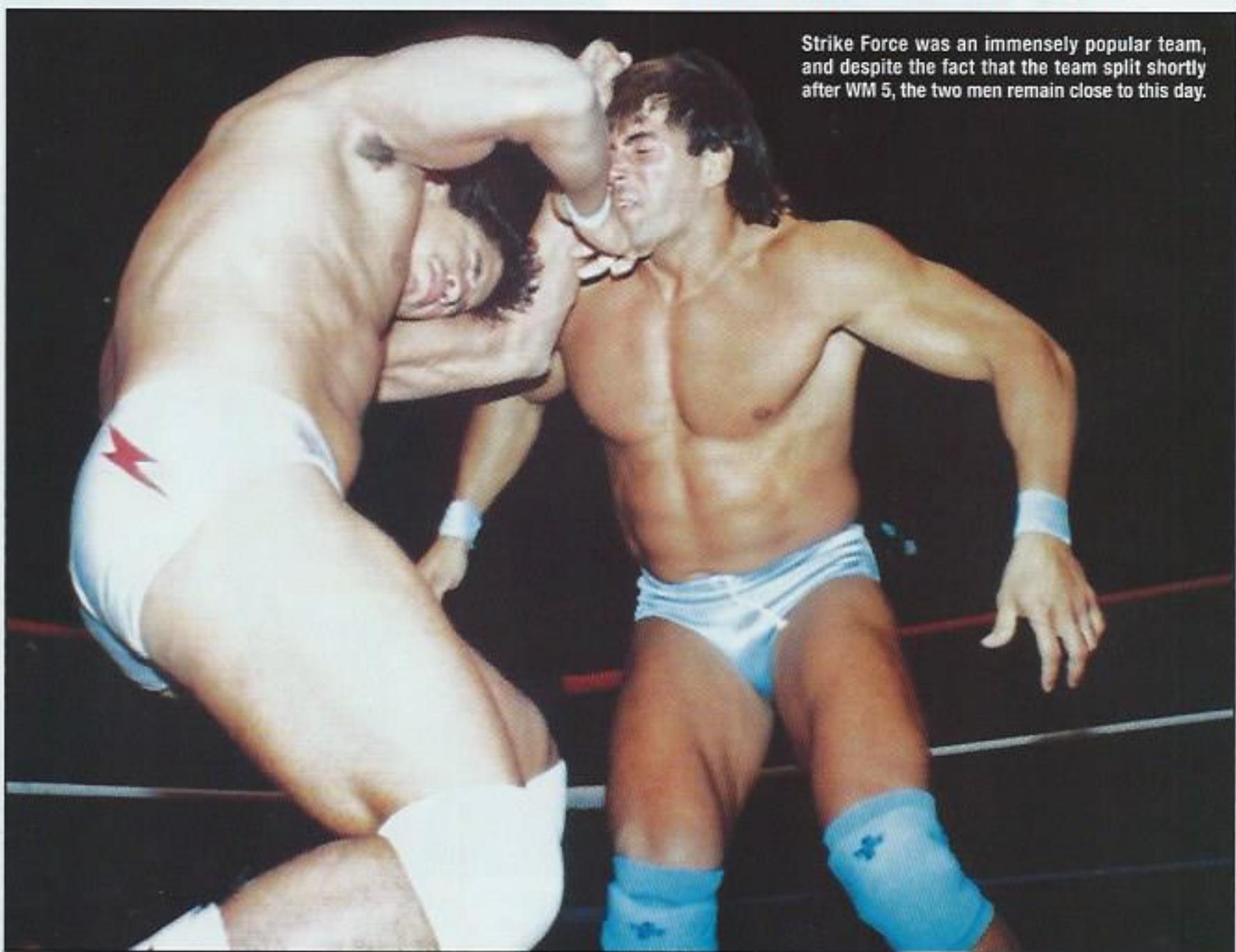
A: I wanted to be a heel. I saw so many guys make the transition from babyface to heel. I figured, by that time, I was a good enough worker to make the transition, and I want-



ed to give it a shot. I think I would've made a good heel.

Q: I suppose you'll go down in the annals with Ricky Steamboat, the perennial, eternal babyface.

Strike Force was an immensely popular team, and despite the fact that the team split shortly after WM 5, the two men remain close to this day.



A: (Laughs) Yeah, that's not bad company either.

Q: Not at all. Your 10 years with that company was probably the most important era of change in wrestling history. How do you feel to have been part of that?

A: It was a good time to be part of it. I had a good run, I made decent money, not what the guys are making now, but I was making three or four times more than any of the top wrestlers in the other territories. It was good to be part of the WrestleManias and the other big shows. I was talking to Terry Funk before the boom happened, and he said it was coming to the point that we wouldn't be going to high schools anymore. He said we'd be going to the big arenas, flying all over the place. That's the way it turned out.

Q: When you left the WWF, it wasn't because you were wearing down physically, but because you didn't think there were any more opportunities ... and you were probably making a pretty good living on the indy circuit, too.

A: I wasn't happy on the road. I could make a pretty good living and just work on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays, and not be on the road anymore. I did that for a couple of years, which was really nice. I don't know if you remember the AWF. Sgt. Slaughter and I tried to start that league.

Q: Didn't you, at least in the beginning, wrestle by the round system?

A: Yes. The only reason we didn't make it was because there wasn't enough money. We had all the talent in the world, and people came out to watch them.

Q: The Road Warriors, I remember. Was that ever a syndicated program?

A: We were on New York Channel 2. The only problem was that we were on Monday morning at 2:00. In Houston, we were on at 1:00 in the morning. The time slots were not good. It was hard to get ratings. We were on in Orlando, I think at 11:00 on Saturday mornings, and we had better ratings than the WWF.

Q: You saw many of your peers go to WCW, including Rick Martel. Did you ever give that serious thought?

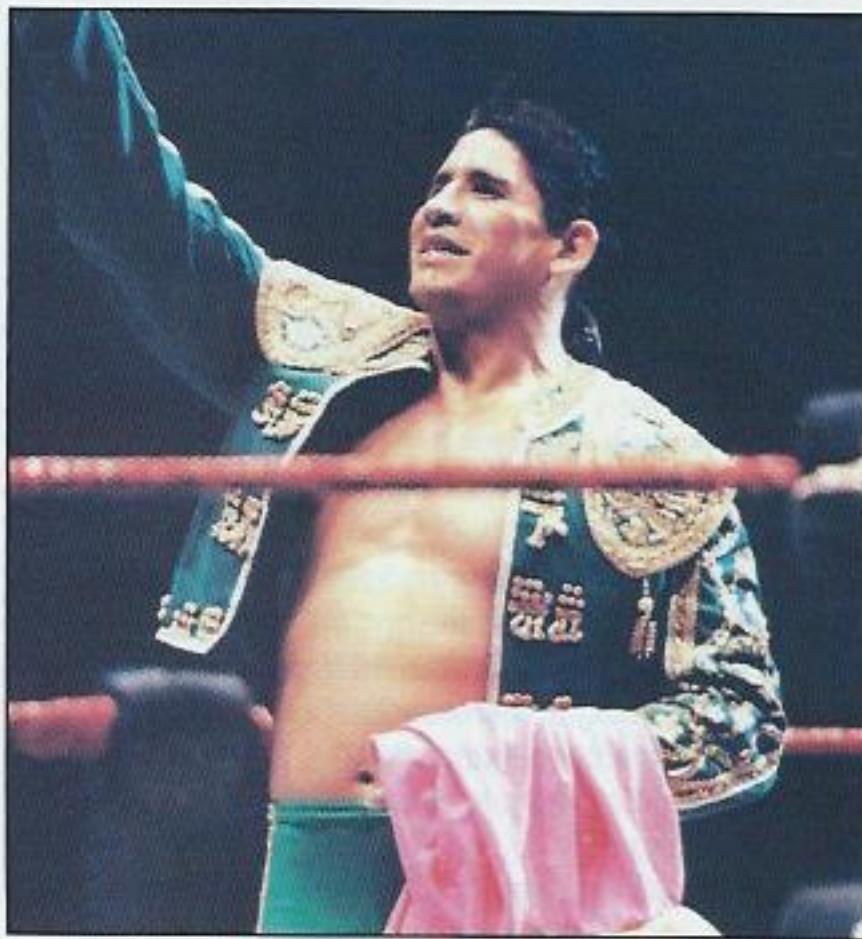
A: No, no, because going to WCW, I'd have to be away from home and on the road again. Once I left the WWF, I had no desire to be on the road.

Q: Although you did make that infamous cameo appearance back in 2000, winning a match over Jeff Jarrett on *Nitro*. That was quite a comeback. Is there anything else in particular that you'd like to say to our readers?

A: I want to thank all the fans for being supportive of Tito Santana over the years. I'm not on the road as much as a lot of the guys. There are some guys still out there making a living, and I kind of feel sorry for them. But when I get out there, I truly enjoy meeting the fans. My wife asks how much longer I'll be doing it. Well, I'm still pretty healthy, and as long as the fans aren't yelling for me to get out of the ring, I'll continue to do it.

Q: One final question: Do you break out the El Matador costume for special occasions?

A: I haven't done that in a long time. If the price is right, I'll do it.



The WWF sent Santana to Mexico to learn how to bullfight, and while he was convinced the gimmick had some legs, the company felt otherwise.



Despite closing in on 60, Santana still wrestles from time to time. His matches with Valentine, while contested at a slower pace, are still filled with drama and intensity.



HEYMAN'S GUYS ON A COLLISION COURSE!

CAN HE STAVE OFF A BROCK-PUNK CIVIL WAR?

AS LONG AS BROCK LESNAR REMAINS "RETIRED," PAUL HEYMAN IS FREE TO PAL AROUND WITH CM PUNK ALL HE WANTS. IF AND WHEN BROCK COMES BACK, HEYMAN'S GOING TO HAVE TO MAKE THE BIGGEST DECISION OF HIS LIFE!

BY STU SAKS

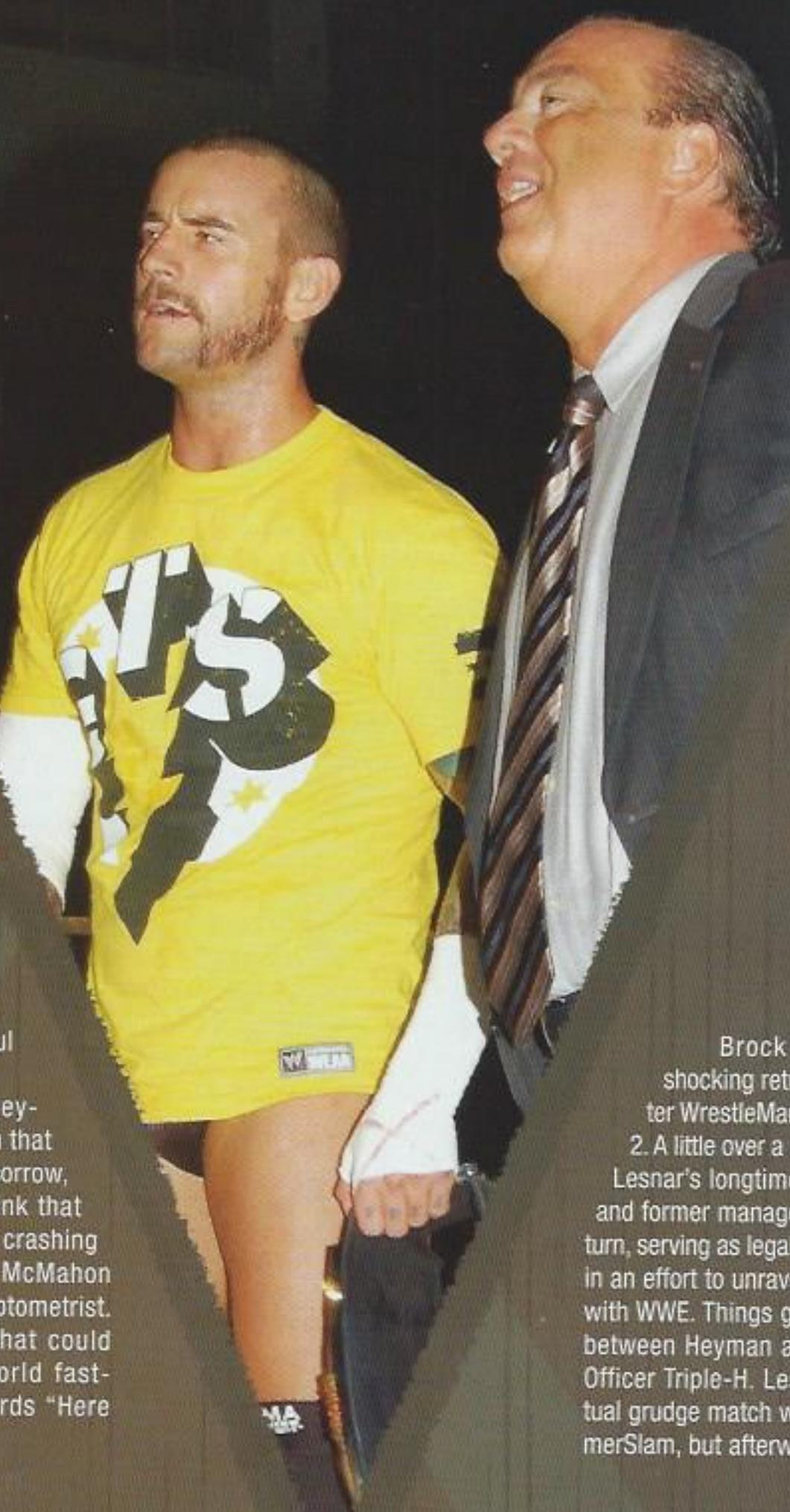
LIFE IS OH-SO-GOOD for Paul Heyman these days. He has his health, a loving family, several thriving business projects, and a pretty nice gig with WWE, a company he was presumed to have parted ways with forever six years ago. Yes, working with WWE has had a slightly negative impact on all the good things listed above, but, all in all, he's a very, very happy man.

Heyman readily admits that he never thought he'd be back in WWE after a less-than-amicable departure in 2006.

Speaking to Arda Ocal of The Score Network, Heyman said: "I wake up everyday surprised that I'm back. I keep on thinking that if they change Vince McMahon's eyeglass prescription, and he realizes that it's *Heyman* on television, and not *Heenan* on television, I'm getting my pink slip the very next morning."

Happy ... happy ... happy.

The added income ... the renewed fame ... the opportunity to banter with the sport's hottest wrestler and best pontificator.



Did we mention that Paul Heyman's happy?

One other thing: Paul Heyman's career pattern is such that bliss is always followed by sorrow, so there is no reason to think that trouble isn't about to come crashing down upon him. No, Vince McMahon isn't planning a trip to the optometrist. This is a serious matter that could rock Heyman's perfect world faster than he can say the words "Here Comes The Pain."

Brock Lesnar made his shocking return to WWE a day after WrestleMania 28, this past April 2. A little over a month later, Heyman, Lesnar's longtime friend, biographer, and former manager, also made his return, serving as legal/business consultant in an effort to unravel a contract dispute with WWE. Things got ugly very quickly between Heyman and Chief Operating Officer Triple-H. Lesnar won his eventual grudge match with Triple-H at SummerSlam, but afterward, he shocked the

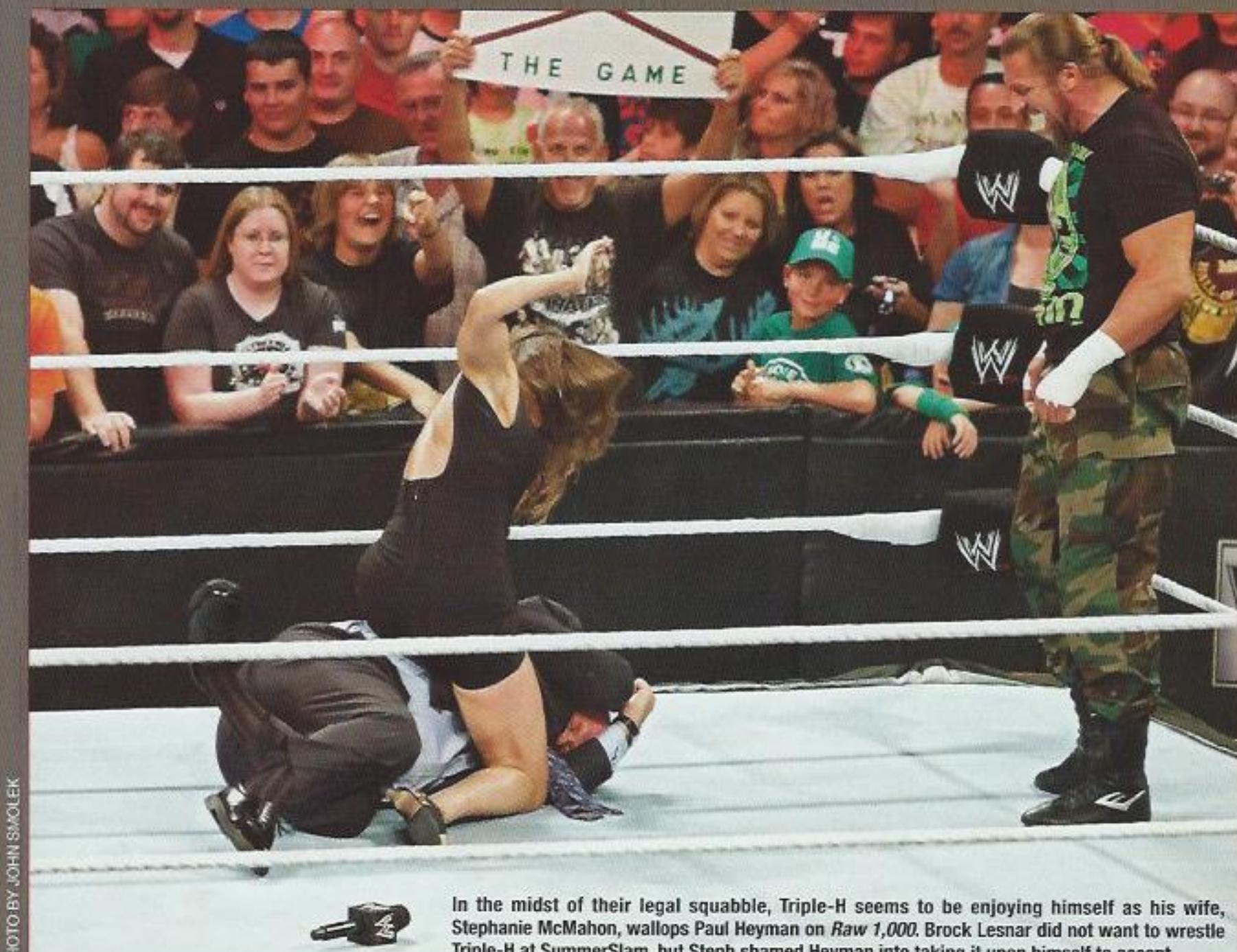


PHOTO BY JOHN SMOLEK

wrestling world again by Touting that he was again retiring from wrestling.

Heyman was suddenly without a reason to be in WWE, though that void would quickly be filled. Two weeks later, another of Heyman's longtime friends, CM Punk, attacked John Cena during an episode of *Raw*, a move that was apparently orchestrated by Heyman. The two have been together ever since.

But what of Lesnar? Does anyone really think he's not going to return to WWE, at least by WrestleMania 29? And what are the implications of his return, assuming Heyman and Punk are still together by that point?

Here comes the pain. And here comes the sorrow.

"Flat out, Brock isn't going to like it if he decides to come back and has to split his time with Punk," said Tommy Dreamer, who knows all three men quite well. "I can't state this for a fact, but knowing Brock, he probably wasn't too thrilled that Paul didn't quit at the same

time he did. I can tell you with certainty that if he comes back—and I think he will—he'd expect Paul to dump Punk."

And if he doesn't?

"Well, then, get ready for some fireworks!"

So how about it, Paul Heyman? To your knowledge, is Lesnar coming back? Would he agree to form a triumvirate with you and Punk? Would Punk be okay with that? If you had to choose between Lesnar and Punk, who would it be?

"I'll make it easy for you," Heyman responded in an e-mail. "To question 1: No comment. To question 2: No comment. To question 3: No comment. To question 4: No comment. To question 5: No comment."

Okay, so we gather Heyman's not talking. But how about a comment from somebody who's seen first-hand what can happen when Heyman has to deal with multiple competing egos? Larry Zbyszko was a member of perhaps the sport's greatest supergroup, Paul Heyman's Dangerous Alliance, in WCW about

20 years ago. "The Dangerous Alliance could have been huge," recalled Zbyszko, "and it was for a very short time. But you had a guy with a huge ego trying to maintain control of a group of guys, all of whom had huge egos. What a mess!"

The Dangerous Alliance was a veritable "Who's Who" of WCW talent, including Zbyszko, Rick Rude, Arn Anderson, Bobby Eaton, Madusa Miceli, and some guy named Steve Austin. "On talent alone, I'd put our group over The Four Horsemen any day," said Zbyszko. "The difference is they endured for years. We fizzled out in the blink of an eye. Paul was the manager. It was his job to keep us together. He couldn't do it."

Punk, being a student of history, is not likely to put himself in that situation. The odds of a Punk-Heyman-Lesnar supergroup forming are very long. The more likely scenario is that he and/or Lesnar will demand that Heyman make a choice. That, of course, would put Heyman in a position in which he would alienate a long-time friend.



Heyman feels Lesnar's pain as Triple-H drives a knee into his midsection (left), but in the end, it was Brock who came out on top (above). The former WWE and UFC champ inexplicably announced his retirement the next day.

"One of them would remove himself from the list of 'Heyman Guys' if that were the case," said Dreamer.

But who?

"That's a tough one," Dreamer said. "I think Paul has more fun with Punk, who's his intellectual equal. But his history with Lesnar goes farther back. I think, because Brock hasn't been part

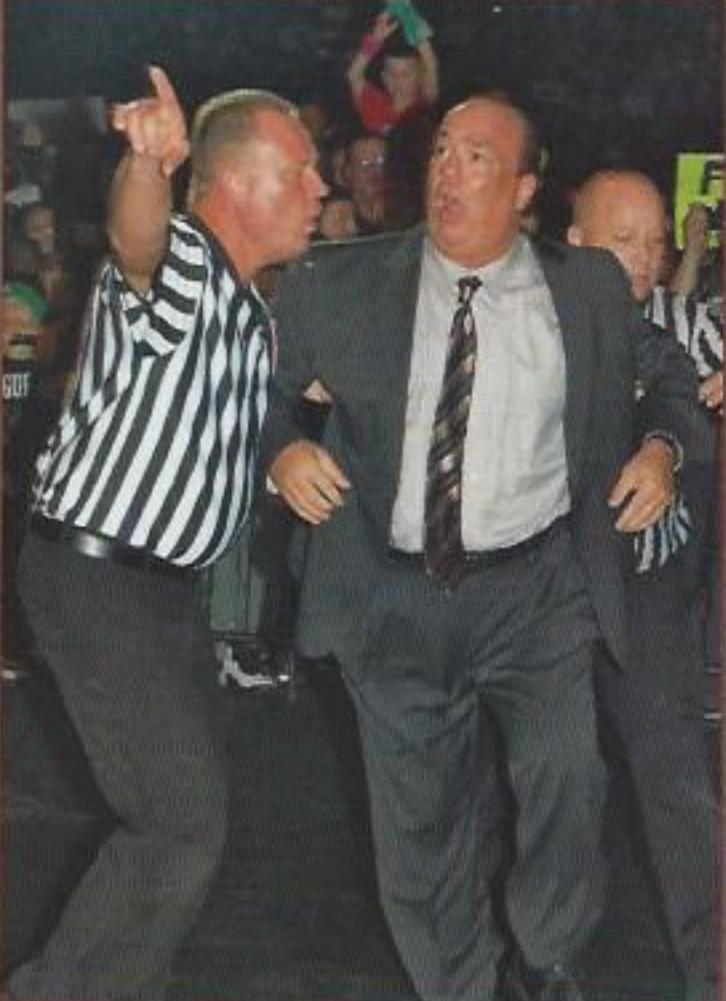
of the scene on a regular basis for so long, he needs Heyman more—in the traditional manager's role. If you put a gun to my head and made me choose, though, I think Paul would go with the one he thinks is more likely to be around for the long haul, and that's Punk."

So Heyman chooses Punk. Why not? Lesnar's the understanding type, right?

"Ha!" said Dreamer. "Like I said, fireworks."

Fast-forward to WrestleMania 29, April 7 at MetLife Stadium in New Jersey: Brock Lesnar vs. CM Punk. Heyman's in Punk's corner. But who would be in Lesnar's?

Need Triple-H's phone number, Brock? □



Heyman is ejected from ringside after the fans voted via text message that he should not be allowed to stay for CM Punk's WWE title match against Ryback (left). While Punk might have relied on Heyman's interference to protect his title, he uses the actual title belt against Ryback to earn the DQ on his own (right).

CAN WWE'S TAG TEAM REVIVAL LAST? HISTORY SAYS, “HELL NO”!

We've been down this road before. WWE teases a greater emphasis on the tag team division and then changes its mind. Is that about to happen again? The number that could make that determination is 2½. Find out why

BY AL CASTLE

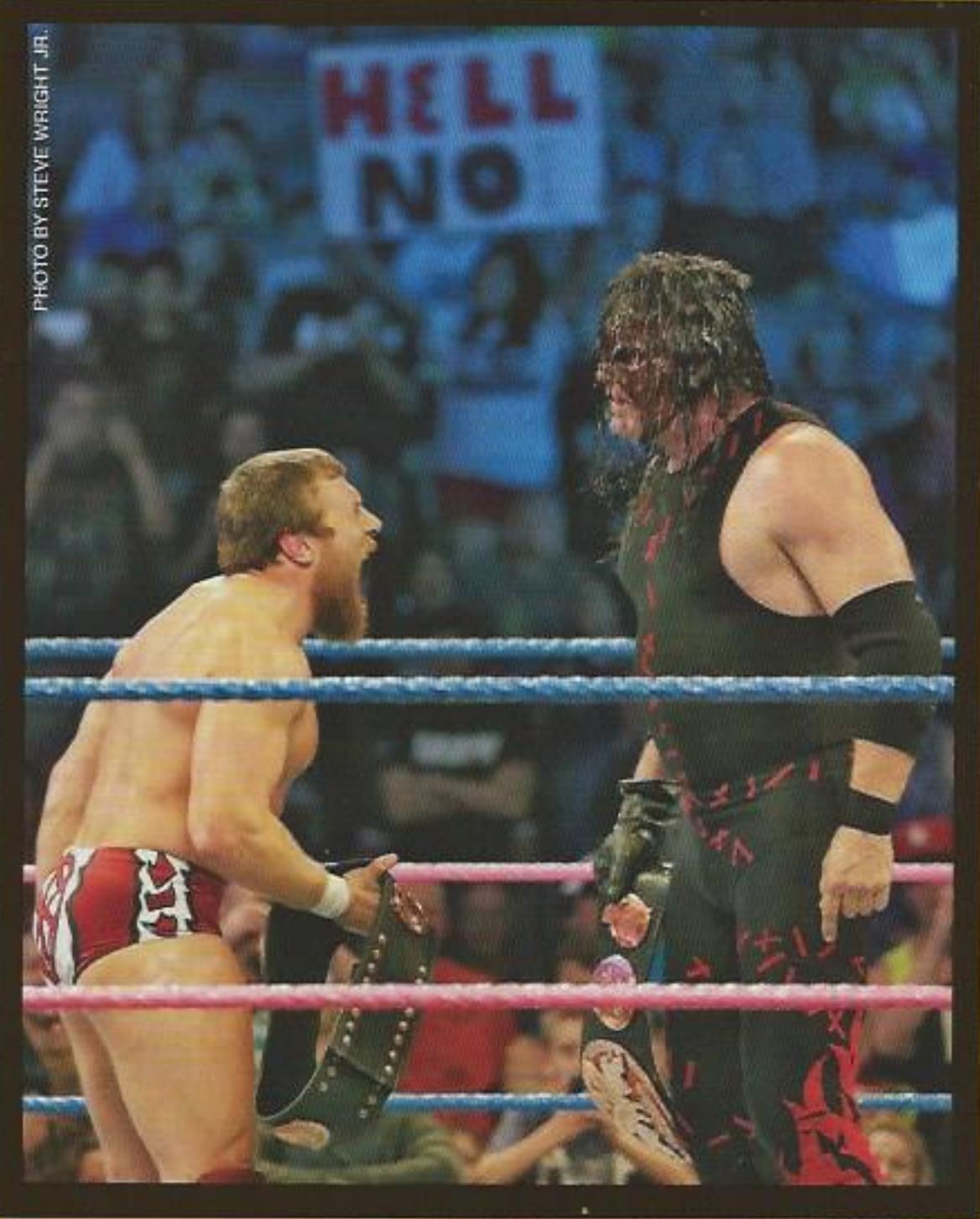
WHEN WRESTLING FANS talk about the glory days of tag team wrestling in WWE, they typically reference teams like The British Bulldogs, The Hart Foundation, and Dream Team, or the Hardys, Dudleys, and Edge and Christian. But that discussion may one day include names like Team Hell No and The Prime Time Players. After countless false starts over the past decade, it's looking more and more like a full-on renaissance of tag team wrestling is underway in the WWE.

The company's tag team champions are comprised of two main-event stars in Kane and Daniel Bryan. Several other new tag teams with big upsides have formed, including Sin Cara and Rey Mysterio Jr., The Rhodes Scholars (Cody Rhodes and Damien Sandow), and Zack Ryder and Santino Marella.

Unquestionably, WWE's focus on its tag teams is a major departure from just months ago, when the division was primarily relegated to matches on WWE's Internet show, *Superstars*.

Today, tag team matches are not only prominently featured on WWE's main television programs, but so are segments advancing tag team characters and storylines. Watching Kane and Bryan argue in a diner may not be every wrestling fan's idea of quality entertainment, but it's more attention than Kofi Kingston and R-Truth ever got when they were the champions.

But perhaps the bigger question is not whether a tag team renaissance is taking place in WWE, but, rather, will it last?

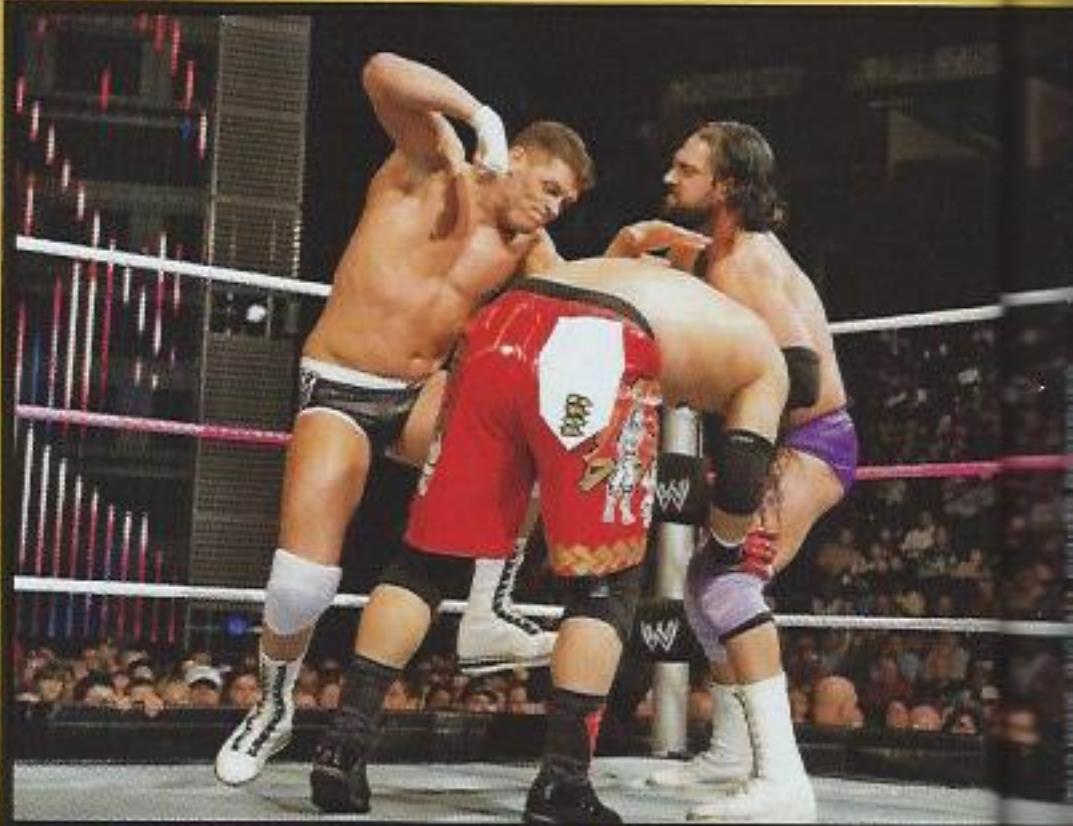


WWE tag team champions Daniel Bryan and Kane shout it out after a successful title defense. These two men can bring a crowd to tears with laughter and opponents to their knees with pain.

Darren Young and Titus O'Neil are a team in every sense of the word. With no aspirations of singles glory, they watch out for each other in and out of the ring.



Cody Rhodes and Damien Sandow came together after wrestling Bryan and Kane in respective matches on a Smackdown card in September. Both enjoyed the experience and decided to make a go of it in a division that keeps gaining momentum.



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Though they share a heritage and a wrestling style, Sin Cara and Rey Mysterio Jr. are an unlikely pairing. Both have enjoyed singles success that has brought them to the top 10 in the "PWI 500." Their tag team move set is so unique, it would be a treat to see them stay together for a while.

"There's definitely some buzz right now around tag team wrestling. But I'm trying not to get my hopes up too much. I've been here too many times before," said one former WWE tag team champion who has recently returned to the division. "Hopefully, fans—and my bosses—realize we're more than just the sum of our parts."

It's not the first time in recent years that WWE decision-makers appeared to have rediscovered the appeal of tag team wrestling, only to lose interest within a matter of months. Whether it was Paul London and Brian Kendrick or John Morrison and The Miz, several tandems have given lovers of tag team

wrestling reason for hope only to see that hope dashed.

But there is reason for optimism this time around. The expansion of *Monday Night Raw* to three hours, as well as the addition of *Saturday Morning Slam* and *Main Event*, to WWE's weekly lineup means WWE has an extra 2½ hours of television to fill each week. And tag team wrestling has been one of the beneficiaries.

WWE has done more than just throw out the likes of Primo and Epico to kill five minutes in the middle of the hour. Instead, it's thoughtfully created several new duos with chemistry and charisma.

Chief among them are the reigning WWE tag team champions, Kane and

Bryan—or Team Hell No as the odd couple have been dubbed by fans. The imposing WWE veteran and the compact technician seemed like an unlikely pairing, especially considering the fact that they were feuding with each other just months ago. But, for all their arguing, Kane and Bryan have not only turned out to be one of the most entertaining acts on WWE television, but have also meshed pretty well in the ring.

And why not? The pairing of the fundamentally sound grappler and the powerful behemoth has proved successful in the past for teams like Yokozuna and Owen Hart and The Colossal Connection of Haku and Andre the Giant.

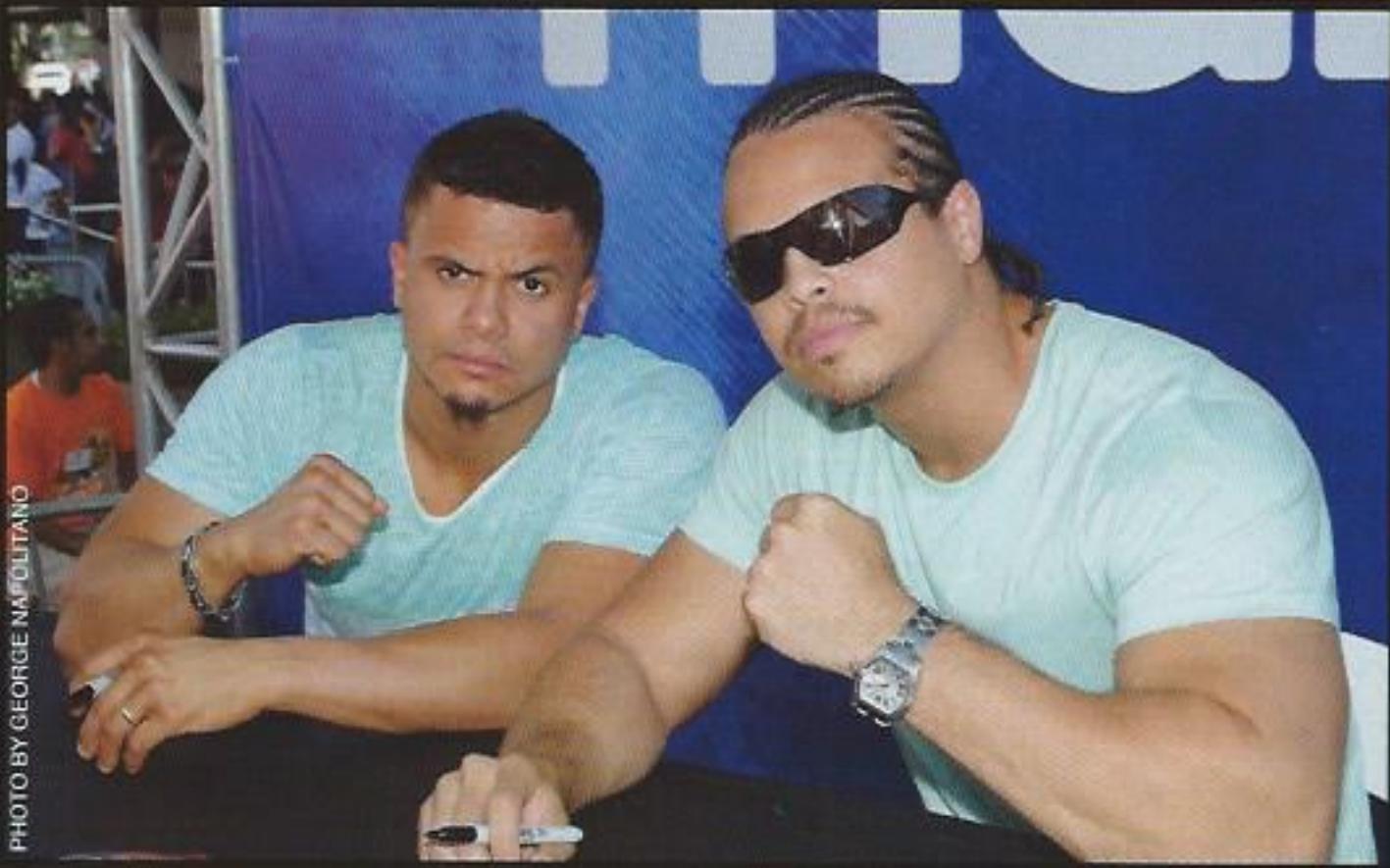


PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

Primo and Epico are former tag team champions that didn't do themselves any favors by losing to Ryback in a straight two-on-one handicap match. As skilled as they are, though, they cannot be overlooked.



PHOTO BY MARK W. HILL

The teams of Edge and Christian, the Dudleys, and the Hardys battle it out in a TLC match at WrestleMania 17. A true measure of how hot the tag team division is will be if the reigning champions are given an opportunity to defend at WrestleMania 29.

WWE has followed other successful formulas in crafting upstart tag teams with plenty of potential. The pairing of the soulful and hungry Titus O'Neil and Darren Young is reminiscent of former tag champs Rocky Johnson and Tony Atlas. The undersized and high-flying duo of Sin Cara and Rey Mysterio Jr. has a lot in common with Marty Jannetty and Shawn Michaels.

"We've definitely taken a page from some of the great WWE tag teams of the past—teams like The Brain Busters and Beefcake and Valentine," Cody Rhodes said, referring to his alliance with Damien Sandow. "Those guys knew what they wanted and did anything to

get it. The big difference is we're better than all of them."

But Rhodes' potential success in the tag team division may come at the expense of advancing his singles career. That's precisely why Kingston and R-Truth decided to disband their team even at a time when tag team wrestling was gaining momentum. Because singles wrestling has historically been given a much higher priority in WWE, the biggest threat to the future of WWE's revitalized tag division may be the wrestlers themselves, if they decide they'd be better off chasing singles gold.

But students of wrestling's rich history know that, when handled correctly, tag teams can provide compelling, main

event-worthy matches. It's up to WWE, and its fans, to remove the negative stigma that's been unfairly attached to tag team wrestling over the past decade and make it a viable and attractive option both for young wrestlers in search of championship gold, and dedicated veterans looking to extend their careers by taking on a partner.

For decades, fans and wrestling matchmakers alike knew that putting four men in a wrestling ring could provide a brand of excitement and drama not possible with just two men. Hopefully, WWE's up-and-coming tag teams—and, more importantly, the fans' reaction to them—will remind them of that fact. □



RING OF HONOR CHAMPION

KEVIN STEEEN

"The Risk/Reward On This Guy May Scare Off WWE & TNA Forever!"

Kevin Steen in WWE or TNA? Preposterous! He's too flabby and too mouthy. And besides, he hasn't finished decimating Ring of Honor yet. But with his obvious talents and gift of gab, the "Big Two" can't help but give the idea serious consideration

BY AL CASTLE

FOR YEARS, IT'S been the bane of Ring of Honor's existence. Nearly every time one of its wrestlers starts catching on as a hot act, WWE or TNA swoops in with a big money offer and signs him away.

And so why does it seem nobody's worried about that happening with its current heavyweight champion, Kevin Steen?

Despite his technical prowess, ability to command fans' attention like few others, and status as the holder of one of the most prestigious titles in all of wrestling, few people seem to think that TNA or WWE would want anything to do with this man.

One reason is obvious. He doesn't look the part. Despite proving his athleticism and endurance time and again in inspired title defenses, the 5'11", 238-pound Canadian is hardly the picture of physical fitness. And at least in WWE, where top-decision makers Vince McMahon and Triple-H love nothing more than a bodybuilder's physique, Steen's beer belly is not very attractive.

But it may be more than just Steen's flab working against him getting a shot in one of the "Big Two."

THE REED WRESTLER

"It's no secret. Around here, the bosses like to have some control—or at least knowledge—of what the talent is going to say when they have a microphone in their hand," said one WWE star who formerly worked in ROH. "If we've learned anything from Steen over the past couple of years, it's that there's no telling what he'll say or do. And that may be more risk than a publicly traded company is willing to take. Truly, the risk/reward on this guy may scare off WWE and TNA forever."

Indeed, even the pipe-bomb-tossing WWE heavyweight champion CM Punk could be considered tame by the standards of Steen, who has been known to go on profanity-laden tirades against ROH's management at every opportunity. Even after being fired from the company in December 2010, Steen routinely invaded ROH to get his point across.

Steen eventually won his job back, despite the objections of ROH Executive Producer Jim Cornette. And in May, he solidified his position with the company by defeating Davey Richards for the ROH heavyweight title.

For all his objectionable antics, Steen has successfully defended his crown against a variety of tough challengers, including Jay Lethal and Michael Elgin. Having proven himself against most of ROH's lockerroom, some believe the next step is obvious.

Of the 16 men to have held the ROH heavyweight title, nine have gone on to work for TNA or WWE. Some did okay for themselves, including James Gibson, who held the WWE cruiserweight title and still works for the company as a producer. Some didn't last, like *NXT* Season Two winner Kaval, better known as Low-Ki. And four former ROH heavyweight champions even went on to win world titles in WWE or TNA: Samoa Joe, Austin Aries, Daniel Bryan, and Punk.

"There's no doubt about it. Once you've proved yourself in ROH, you're anxious to do the same in front of a bigger audience and against different competition," said Aries, the only two-time ROH heavyweight titleholder. "And make no mistake: WWE and TNA take notice. If ROH has a wrestler that fans consider one of the best in the business, they want nothing more than to sign him away."

But ROH stars don't always want to be signed away. Richards, who has been

Steen puts the force of his not-so-evenly distributed 238 pounds on a helpless Jay Lethal, of course disobeying the referee's demand for a release. Authority figures do not influence the Ring of Honor champion's lifestyle.

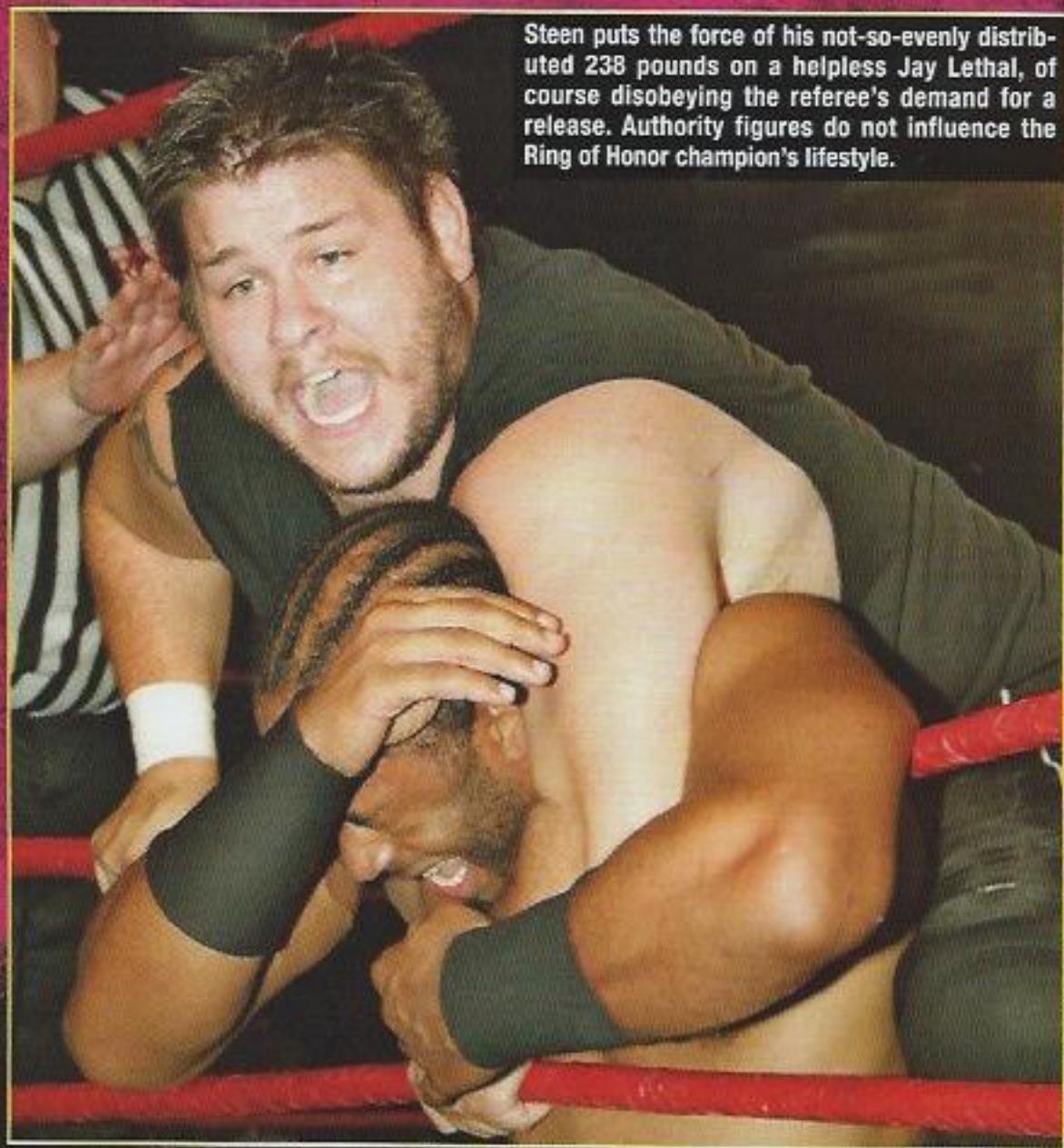


PHOTO BY SCOTT FINKELSTEIN

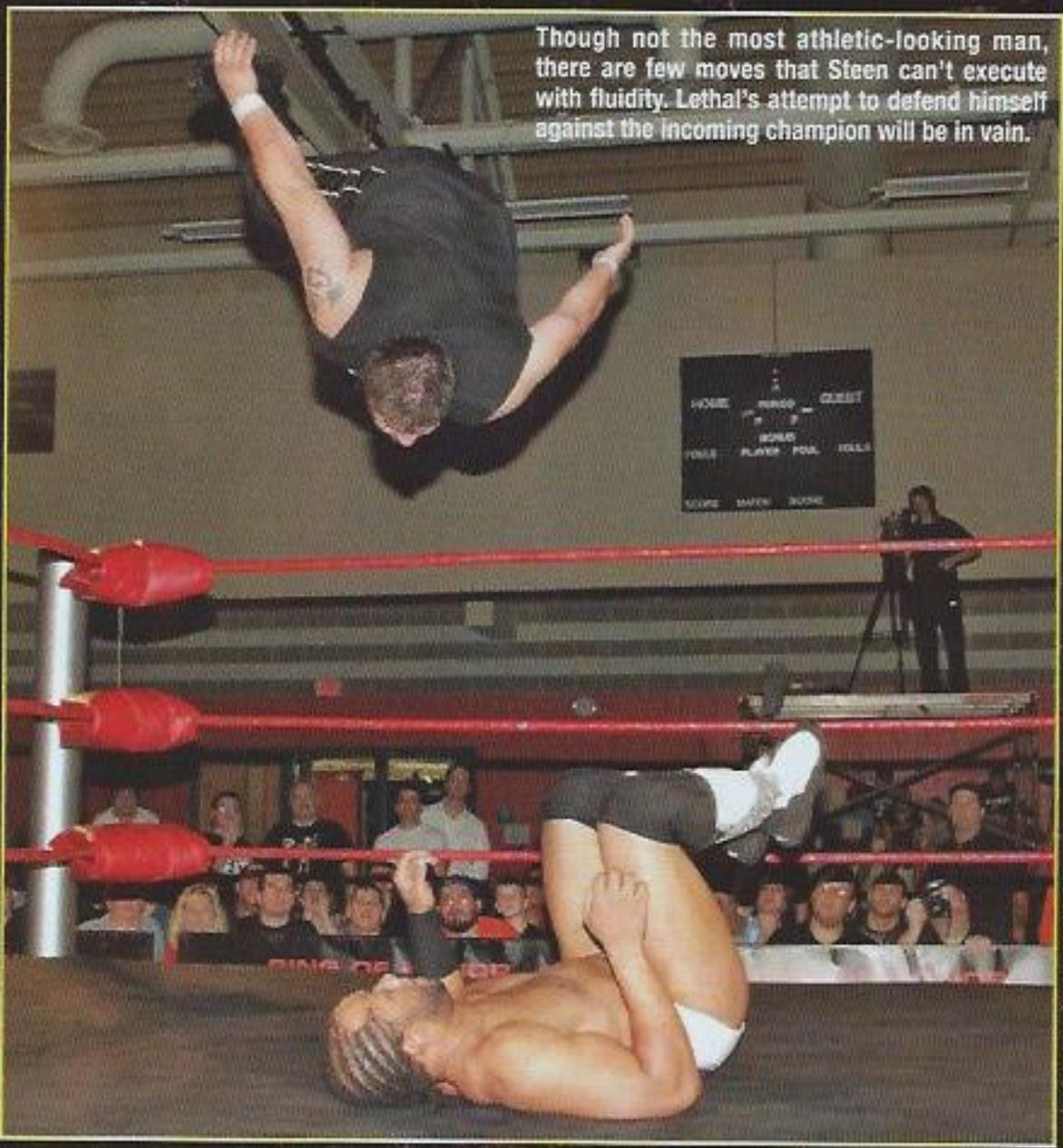


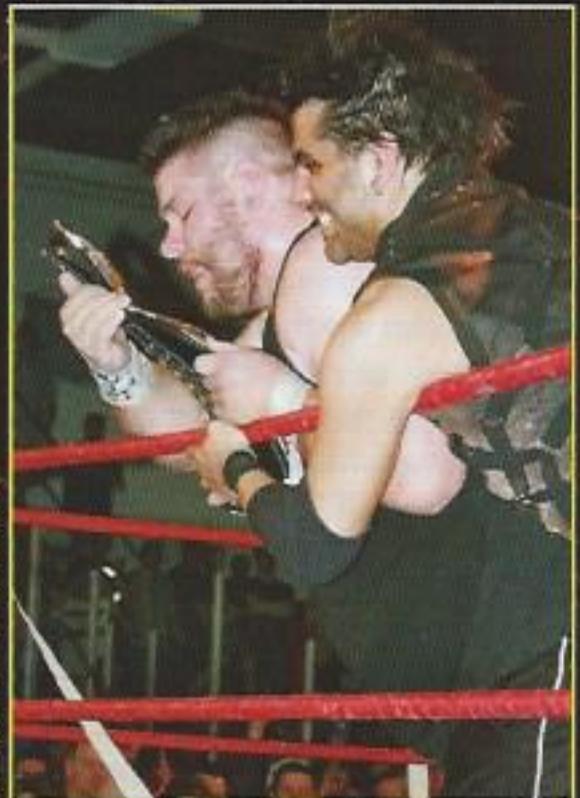
PHOTO BY SCOTT FINKELSTEIN



Steen rips into Michael Elgin's face with the ferocity of a wild animal. This is not the most beloved champion in Ring of Honor history—and that doesn't bother Steen in the least.

long-heralded as one of the brightest stars in the entire sport, has said he's repeatedly turned down offers from TNA and WWE because he doesn't want the hectic travel schedules that come with working for those organizations.

For his part, Steen, 28, gives no indication of what his wrestling future has in store for him.



May 12, 2012, is a day that will surely live in ROH infamy. That was the day Steen captured the heavyweight title from a man who had held the title with honor and dignity, Davey Richards. Though Steen has his fans, few in the Ring of Honor lockerroom or boardroom (besides Jimmy Jacobs) felt much joy at the moment.

"I'd be happy to take Vince McMahon's money, but I'd just as well knock him down in the street in front of his Greenwich mansion and rummage through his pockets," Steen said. "Trust me, the idea of making some eight-year-old John Cena fans in the front row cry is enticing. But I'm not done burning this godforsaken hell hole they call Ring of Honor to the ground yet."

But for all his aloofness, some wrestlers who know Steen well say he's no different than countless others who dream about one day working for WWE or TNA and would do anything to get there—even if it meant transforming his body and toning down his rhetoric.

And even if he wasn't willing to do those things, nobody should rule out WWE or TNA being interested in Steen. Whether it's Brodus Clay or Samoa Joe, both companies have shown a willingness to get behind a wrestler with an untraditional body type if he brings something special to the table. Even Bryan and Punk are departures from the mold of towering, muscle-bound WWE main-eventers.

And in an era where so few wrestlers truly understand the art of the promo, Steen's ability to rile up fans and opponents could be seen as a major commodity.

"Too much is made about what Steen looks like or whether he can be kept on a tight leash," said Jerry Lynn, the only

IF NOT STEEN, WHO?

Here is some other ROH talent WWE and TNA may be scouting:

NAME	THE SKINNY
Eddie Edwards	Former ROH champ has shown his warrior's spirit time and again
Davey Richards	Says he's not interested in WWE, but for the right money, would he reconsider?
The Briscoes	Arguably the most colorful and exciting tag team in all of wrestling
Mike Bennett	Has a great look, as does his valet, former WWE Women's champ Maria Kanellis
Shelton Benjamin	It was a crime WWE gave the former I-C champ the heave-ho
Adam Cole	TV champ is small in stature but big in heart
Michael Elgin	Has been wowing fans all year with pure strength and grit
Jimmy Jacobs	"Zombie Princess" is a little weird, but a heck of a performer
Jay Lethal	Proved in TNA that he can do "sports entertainment" just fine
Roderick Strong	Former ROH champ brings a veteran presence to any lockerroom

wrestler to have held championships in ROH, WWE, and TNA. "The bottom line is that if you're good at what you do, WWE and TNA will give you a look. And Steen's damn good. He's just got to keep doing what he's doing."

And while it may have pained Cornette to lose such promising young studs as Kenny King and Tyler Black (Seth Rollins) to TNA and WWE in recent years, Cornette said he wouldn't shed a tear the day he sees Steen on *Impact* or *Raw*.

"I say good riddance," Cornette said of his mortal enemy. "After tormenting me for the past few years, I'll be all too happy to let him do the same to Dixie Carter or Vince McMahon." □

THE WRESTLING ANALYST



SHEAMUS

Size: 6'6", 280
Years Pro: 11
"PWI 500" Listings: 2008: 226
2009: 94
2010: 10
2011: 12
2012: 5
Titles: Irish Whip Wrestling international heavyweight (2 times)
FCW Florida heavyweight
WWE heavyweight (2 times)
WWE U.S.
WWE World
PWI Awards: None

THE NUMBERS

OFFENSE (9.5): If Sheamus were an NFL halfback, he'd be labeled a north-south runner. He powers straight ahead with little thought of finesse or deception. It's power, power, and more power, all with the idea of setting up White Noise or the Brogue Kick. We bumped his score a bit since he recently added the Cloverleaf as a finisher. And he has stated that he makes a conscious decision to weaken his opponents' backs, including with this new hold.

DEFENSE (8.0): Sheamus may have borrowed the Cloverleaf from Dean Malenko, but he'll never be a man of 1,000 holds/counterholds. His defense is an extension of his offense. He rarely looks to counter his way out of a difficult hold. It's easier for him to power his way out. Witness the occasions on which Alberto Del Rio trapped him in his cross-armbreaker. He used brute strength to escape. This might not be possible against other holds.

CONDITIONING (8.5): This is difficult to assess, but someone should try to test him. Just try to find a Sheamus singles match that extended beyond 15 to 17 minutes. You'd think a man with reigns as WWE and World champion would have a fair number. But you might go back a few years in your search. Cardiovascular conditioning isn't a problem, but he expends so much energy in the first few minutes that pacing could be an issue against the wrong opponent. He smartly went for quick wins against Daniel Bryan; we all remember what happened at WrestleMania 28.

SPEED (8.5): Sheamus wouldn't win a footrace against too many of his fellow WWE stars. But is that relevant inside a wrestling ring? Sheamus has underrated quickness. He moves well and quickly in short bursts across the ring when setting up his most punishing moves. Despite his size, you would hardly call him plodding.

ABILITY TO ABSORB PUNISHMENT (9.5): If you're a brawler at heart, you better be able to take a punch and a kick ... and anything else Big Show or Del Rio or Bryan can throw at you. Sheamus can and has. Hit him hard and he'll smile and take it as a challenge to hit you *harder*. He has wrestled through assorted injuries during his WWE career without complaint. Wearing him down with a more technical and methodical approach would be a better plan than trying to beat him down.

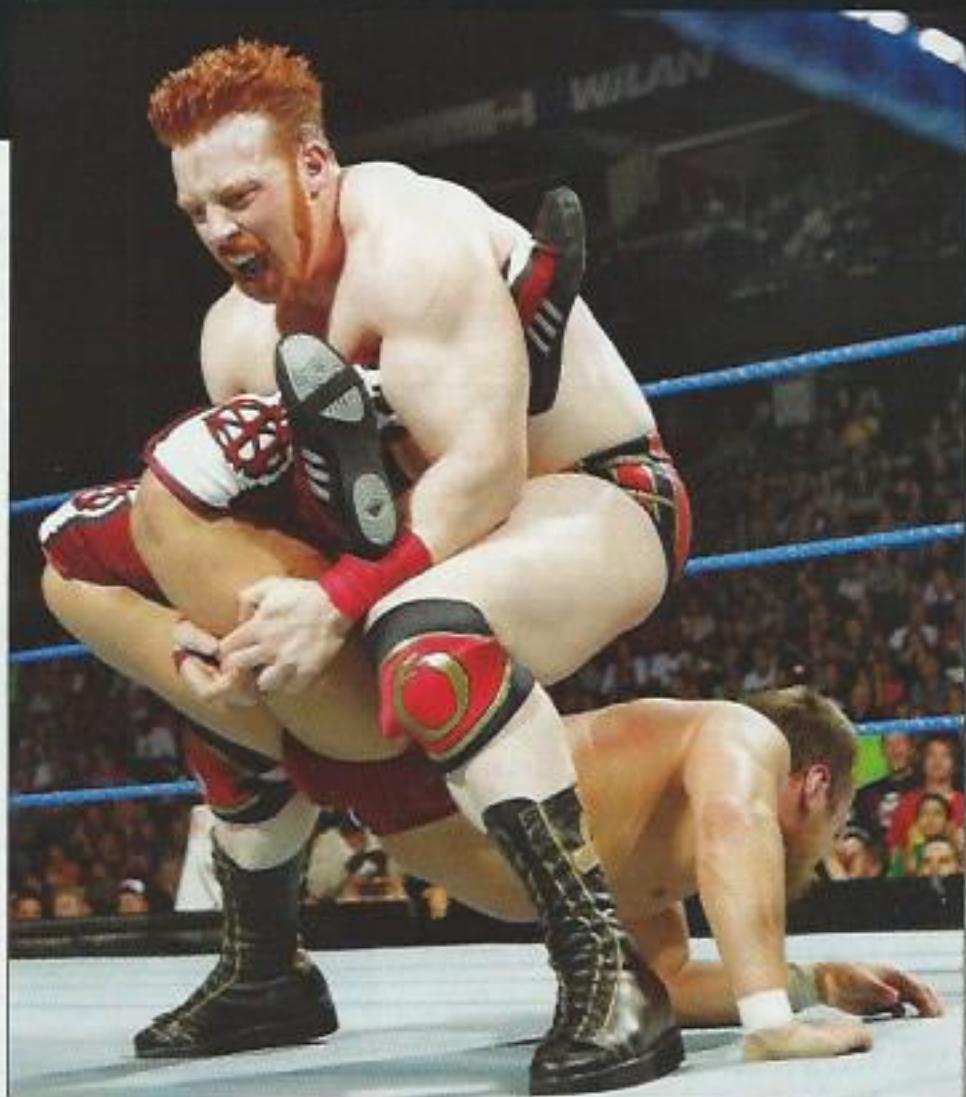
INTANGIBLES (9.0): Supreme confidence goes a long way for Sheamus. He's never intimidated, and that, combined with his unusual physical appearance (the wild red hair and white, white skin), makes him stand out as something special and has established a strong connection between him and fans, whether he is a heel or fan favorite. He doesn't excel in any area except in using his size/strength, but he has no huge deficiencies, either. He has maximized his physical skill set and possesses an unusual charisma.

THE ANALYSIS

STRENGTHS: The "Celtic Warrior" is an intimidating throwback. Every match is a virtual seek-and-destroy mission. But he doesn't take the extreme caveman approach of Ryback. The addition of the Cloverleaf to his arsenal suggests he has a cerebral side in which he is making subtle adjustments to his game plan.

WEAKNESSES: Is he somewhat predictable, given his fondness for those big moves of his? Perhaps a tad overconfident? He has shrugged off those criticisms, but there is something there. And it would be interesting to see him feud with wrestlers who have the ability to extend matches beyond 20 minutes regularly. His stamina might be a serious issue. Paging Y2J.

FUTURE: Sheamus is the equivalent of a dominant Intercontinental champ of a generation ago. He was a tremendous World champ in WWE through most of 2012, but that title is secondary to the WWE title by a huge margin. Witness the Sheamus-CM Punk champion-vs.-champion match on the premiere of the *WWE Main Event* show in October. Very exciting, competitive match, but Punk won cleanly, and it wasn't treated as a huge deal. With the brand extension essentially dead, the challenge for Sheamus in 2013 and beyond is to try to bust through into the elite of the elite in WWE. He's not quite there yet. □



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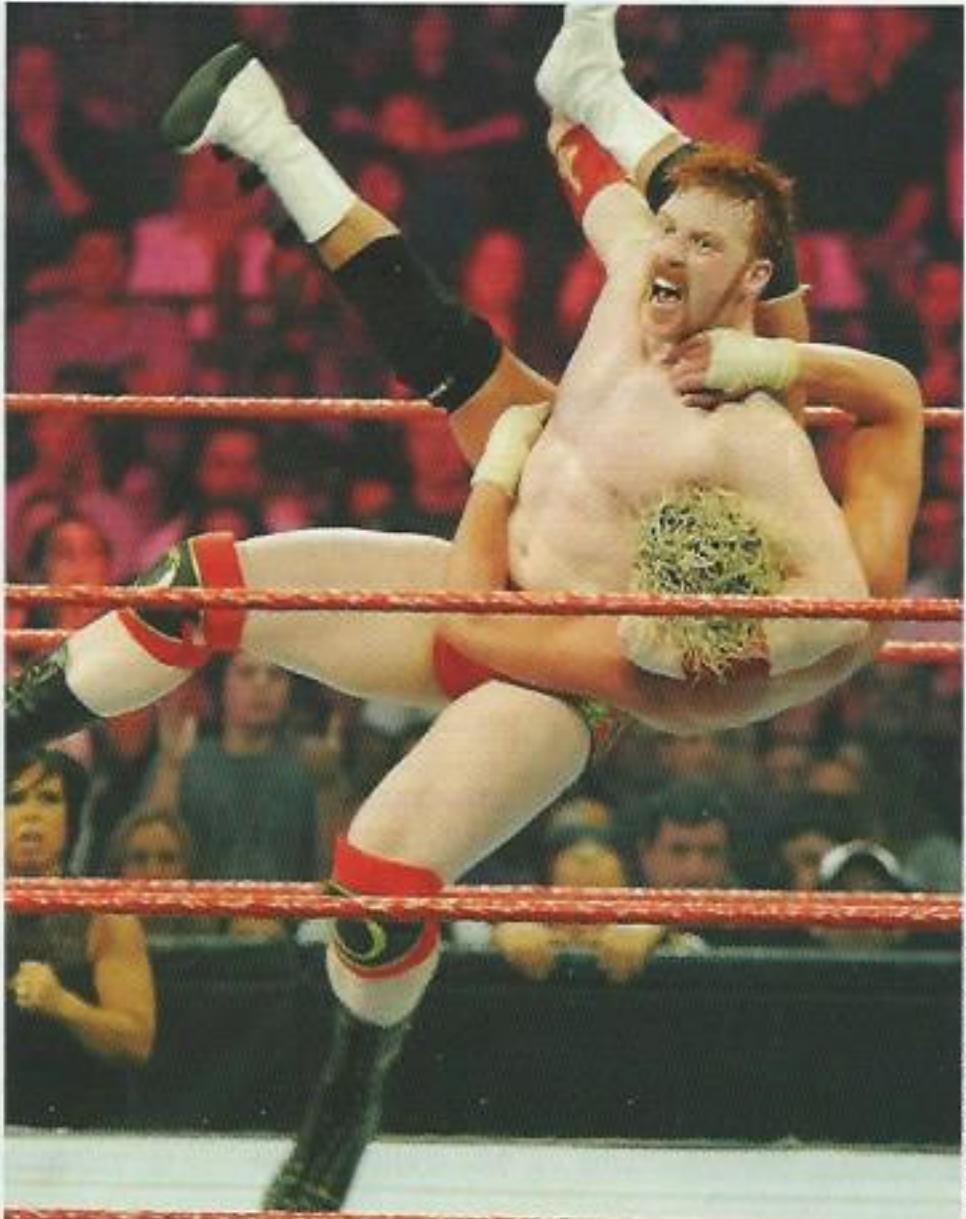


PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

Few wrestlers—including Dolph Ziggler—can avoid a three-count after being nailed by Sheamus' White Noise. It's difficult for opponents to find a weakness in Sheamus' game if they can't even extend their matches to the point where power is even somewhat diminished.

OFFICIAL RATINGS

TOP 10

- 1 JEFF HARDY**
225, Cameron, NC
(-) TNA World champion
- 2 CM PUNK**
222, Chicago, IL
(1) WWE heavyweight champion
- 3 RYBACK**
297, Las Vegas, NV
(-) No. 1 contender WWE heavyweight title
- 4 AUSTIN ARIES**
210, Minneapolis, MN
(2) No. 1 contender TNA World title
- 5 THE BIG SHOW**
447, Tampa, FL
(7) WWE World champion
- 6 HIROSHI TANAHASHI**
230, Gifu, Japan
(10) IWGP heavyweight champion
- 7 JAMES STORM**
236, Leipers Fork, TN
(-) No. 2 contender TNA World title
- 8 SHEAMUS**
267, Dublin, Ireland
(3) No. 1 contender WWE World title
- 9 KEVIN STEEN**
238, Marietta, GA
(-) Ring of Honor heavyweight champion
- 10 RANDY ORTON**
235, St. Louis, MO
(-) No. 2 contender WWE World title



PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

THE BIG SHOW

RAW

WWE Champion:
CM PUNK
(-) 222, Chicago, IL

- 1 RYBACK**
(-) 297, Las Vegas, NV
- 2 SHEAMUS**
(-) 267, Dublin, Ireland
- 3 RANDY ORTON**
(-) 235, St. Louis, MO
- 4 ANTONIO CESARO**
(-) 232, Lucerne, Switzerland
- 5 WADE BARRETT**
(-) 246, Lancashire, England
- 6 KOFI KINGSTON**
(-) 220, Ghana, West Africa
- 7 ALBERTO DEL RIO**
(-) 240, San Luis Potosi, Mexico
- 8 DOLPH ZIGGLER**
(-) 221, Hollywood, CA
- 9 DANIEL BRYAN**
(-) 190, Aberdeen, WA
- 10 BRODUS CLAY**
(-) 375, Planet Funk

World Champion:
THE BIG SHOW
(-) 447, Tampa, FL

- 11 KANE**
(-) 322, Death Valley
- 12 THE Miz**
(-) 231, Cleveland, OH
- 13 CODY RHODES**
(-) 223, Marietta, GA
- 14 SIN CARA**
(-) 175, Mexico City, Mexico
- 15 DAMIEN SANDOW**
(-) 243, Palo Alto, CA
- 16 R-TRUTH**
(-) 220, Charlotte, NC
- 17 JUSTIN GABRIEL**
(-) 213, Cape Town, S. Africa
- 18 ZACK RYDER**
(-) 214, Merrick, NY
- 19 MICHAEL McGILLCUTTY**
(-) 227, Champlin, MN
- 20 DAVID OTUNGA**
(-) 229, Hollywood, CA

TNA

World Champion:
JEFF HARDY
(9) 225, Cameron, NC

- 1 AUSTIN ARIES**
(9) 210, Minneapolis, MN
- 2 JAMES STORM**
(2) 236, Leipers Fork, TN
- 3 SAMOA JOE**
(3) 280, American Samoa
- 4 ROB VAN DAM**
(7) 236, Battle Creek, MI
- 5 BOBBY ROODE**
(1) 235, New York, NY
- 6 MAGNUS**
(10) 245, King's Lynn, England
- 7 KURT ANGLE**
(6) 240, Pittsburgh, PA
- 8 BULLY RAY**
(4) 296, Hell's Kitchen, NY
- 9 AJ STYLES**
(5) 215, Gainesville, GA
- 10 CHRISTOPHER DANIELS**
(-) 240, Kalamazoo, MI

RING OF HONOR

Champion:
KEVIN STEEN
(9) 238, Marietta, GA

- 1 ADAM COLE**
(1) 190, Panama City, FL
- 2 JAY LETHAL**
(7) 225, Elizabeth, NJ
- 3 MICHAEL ELGIN**
(2) 265, Toronto, ON
- 4 EDDIE EDWARDS**
(3) 214, Boston, MA
- 5 RODERICK STRONG**
(4) 215, Tampa, FL
- 6 DAVEY RICHARDS**
(5) 208, Othello, WA
- 7 TADARIUS THOMAS**
(-) 192, Detroit, MI
- 8 MIKE BENNETT**
(6) 225, Caver, MA
- 9 TOMMASO CIAMPA**
(5) 199, Boston, MA
- 10 RHINO**
(8) 270, Detroit, MI

Top 10 and Tag Team ratings are based on won-lost records for the past month, quality of opposition, and inherent skill of each wrestler or team. These ratings are compiled by the magazine's editorial board. All other ratings are based on the official current positions of challengers to the top title in each category. Because of the crossover of talent between Raw and Smackdown, the two brands are combined into a single 1-20 ranking. The number in parentheses indicates a wrestler's position in that category last issue; (-) indicates that the wrestler was not rated in that category last issue, while (C) indicates the wrestler was champion in that category last issue.

FOR PERIOD ENDED NOVEMBER 1, 2012

ALLIED INDEPENDENT WRESTLING FEDERATION: Champion—Chief Attakullakulla; 1—Louis Moore; 2—Diafullah Dobashi; 3—John Campbell; 4—Badd Blood; 5—Rob McBride; 6—Sexy KC; 7—Matt Houston; 8—Matt Hardy; 9—Joey Image; 10—Storm Goodlin

Alpha-1 Pro Wrestling: Champion—Psycho Mike; 1—Josh Alexander; 2—Ethan Page; 3—Scotty O'Shea; 4—Justin Sane; 5—Alessandro Del Bruno; 6—Cheech; 7—Johnny Wave; 8—Ashley Sixx; 9—Colin Delaney; 10—Timothy Krane

American Premier Wrestling: Champion—Bobby Mathem; 1—Jeremy Young; 2—Eric Glamor; 3—ARGE; 4—Jason Gold; 5—CUJO; 6—Hammer 4 Obama; 7—VULCAN; 8—David Coleman; 9—Scotty Bullwinkle; 10—JD

BIG WEST WRESTLING: Champion—Collin Cutler; 1—KC Andrews; 2—Kyle Sebastian; 3—Tony Baroni; 4—Cremator Von Slasher; 5—Black Dragon; 6—Ravenous Randy; 7—Massive Damage; 8—Sid Sylum; 9—Bobby Sharp; 10—Chris Perish

CANADIAN NATIONAL WRESTLING ALLIANCE: Champion—Bobby Sharp; 1—A.J. Sanchez; 2—K.C. Andrews; 3—Tyler James; 4—Matt Fairlane; 5—Kyle Sebastian; 6—Gangrel; 7—Danny Duggan; 8—Massive Damage; 9—Bulldog McBain; 10—The Mauler

COMBAT ZONE WRESTLING: Champion—MASADA; 1—A.R. Fox; 2—Sami Callihan; 3—DJ Hyde; 4—Jake Crist; 5—Dave Crist; 6—Joe Gacy; 7—Matt Tremont; 8—Joker; 9—Drew Gulak; 10—Greg Excellent

ELITE PRO WRESTLING ALLIANCE: Champion—Luke Gallows; 1—Rhino; 2—Jake Davis; 3—Vince Vega; 4—Chris Cline; 5—Tommy Dreamer; 6—Sal Sincere; 7—Scott Titus; 8—Robbie Paige; 9—Brandon Scott; 10—Bodie Williams

NXT: Champion—Seth Rollins; 1—Jinder Mahal; 2—Leo Kruger; 3—Kassius Ohno; 4—Rick Victor; 5—Michael McGillicutty; 6—Big E Langston; 7—Richie Steamboat; 8—Bo Dallas; 9—Trent Barreta; 10—Conor O'Brian

OHIO VALLEY WRESTLING: Champion—Crimson; 1—Cliff Compton; 2—Rob Terry; 3—Johnny Spade; 4—Alex Silva; 5—Jason Wayne; 6—Chris Silvio; 7—Sam Shaw; 8—James Thomas; 9—Rocco Bellagio; 10—Jack Black

PRIMAL CONFLICT WRESTLING: Champion—Jimmy Jannetty; 1—Dirty Money; 2—Drolix; 3—Bobby Shields; 4—Napalm Bomb; 5—Mustafa Aziz Daniels; 6—Hoss Hagood; 7—Logan Hodge; 8—Dino Cicero; 9—Solo; 10—Tyler Steel

SHOWTIME ALL-STAR WRESTLING: Champion—Vordell Walker; 1—Chris Michaels; 2—Chase Stevens; 3—Psicosis; 4—Jeremiah Plunkett; 5—Micah Taylor; 6—Tony Kozina; 7—Jesse Emerson; 8—Drew Haskins; 9—Tat2; 10—Luke Gallows

UNITED STATES CHAMPIONSHIP WRESTLING: Champion—Jake Slater; 1—Chasyn Rance; 2—Jason the Giant; 3—Blain Rage; 4—Super Destroyer; 5—Brandon Scherer; 6—Santana Garrett; 7—Chico Adams; 8—Boss Hog Calhoun; 9—Josh Hess; 10—Gorilla Hanley

NWA

Champion:

VACANT

1—COLT CABANA

(-) 233, Chicago, IL

2—DAMIEN WAYNE

(-) 227, Norfolk, VA

3—CHANCE PROPHET

(-) 225, Sacramento, CA

4—KAHAGAS

(-) 200, Paris Unknown

5—WILLIE MACK

(-) 244, St. Louis, MO

6—CARSON

(-) 227, College Station, TX

7—SHAUN TEMPERS

(-) 220, Hampton, VA

8—ERIC WATTS

(-) 230, Pasadena, CA

9—SHAUN RICKER

(-) 229, Hagerstown, MD

10—SCOTT SUMMERS

(-) 239, Houston, TX

JAPAN

1—HIROSHI TANAHASHI

(1) 230, Gifu, Japan
IWGP heavyweight champion

2—MASAKATSU FUNAKI

(-) 209, Aomori, Japan
AJPW Triple Crown champion

3—TAKESHI MORISHIMA

(3) 290, Tokyo, Japan
GHC heavyweight champion

4—KAZUCHIKA OKADA

(-) 240, Tokyo, Japan

5—SHUNSUKE NAKAMURA

(4) 230, Kyoto, Japan

6—JUN AKIYAMA

(2) 240, Osaka, Japan

7—KOTA IBUSHI

(10) 190, Kagoshima, Japan

8—HIROOKI GOTO

(5) 230, Kumamoto, Japan

9—HIROSHI YAMATO

(5) 214, Tokyo, Japan

10—LOW-KI

(-) 174, Brooklyn, NY

MEXICO

1—EL TERRIBLE

(1) 230, Nuevo Leon, Mexico
CMLL heavyweight champion

2—EL MESIAS

(3) 245, Bayamon, PR
AAA heavyweight champion

3—L.A. PARK

(2) 221, Monterrey, Mexico

4—EL HIJO DEL PERRO

AGUAYO

(3) 170, Mexico City, Mexico

5—DR. WAGNER JR.

(4) 216, Torreón, Mexico

6—TEXANO JR.

(5) 220, Mexico City, Mexico

7—AVERNO

(6) 174 Mexico City, Mexico

8—DRAGON ROJO JR.

(3) 190, Gomez Palacio, Mexico

9—HECTOR GARZA

(7) 210, Monterrey, Mexico

10—CHESSMAN

(10) 230, Villa Nicolás Romero, Mexico

WOMEN

1—EVE TORRES

(-) 131, Denver, CO

WWE Divas champion

2—SARAYA KNIGHT

(6) 126, Norwich, England

3—TARA

(-) 136, San Bernardino, CA

TNA Knockouts champion

4—JESSICKA HAVOK

(5) 175, Massillon, OH

5—LAYLA

(7) 120, Miami, FL

6—MISS TESSMACHER

(2) 115, Houston, TX

7—KACEE CARLISLE

(10) 155, San Francisco, CA

8—CHEERLEADER MELISSA

(-) 136, San Francisco, CA

9—PAIGE

(-) 120, Norwich, England

10—COURTNEY RUSH

(-) 132, Winnipeg, MB